

CONFLICT

OLIVE HIGGINS PROUTY

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A Novel

BY

OLIVE HIGGINS PROUTY



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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TO
J. C. P.

CONFLICT

∴

BOOK ONE

CONFLICT



CHAPTER I

I

SHE came in through the side door, and stole up the back stairs to her room. She didn't want her mother and father to know that she had come home. She wanted to be alone.

She closed and locked the door of the room, once safely inside, then stood for a moment considering. No. Better not lock it. A locked door would be sure to make her mother ask questions. Her mother might have heard her, and come upstairs at any moment. She had ears for certain noises like a cat's. So now Sheilah turned the key back, then tiptoed cautiously across the room to the light over her dressing-table (the electric button by the door would send off a report like a cap-pistol), and pulled its tasselled cord. A warm pink effulgence flooded the room, flowed over Sheilah. She gazed at herself in the mirror.

Her cheeks were flaming. She pressed her hands against them hard. How hot they were! She hated hot cheeks. She hated feelings. What was the mat-

ter with her lately? Even happiness hurt her sometimes now. Even beauty. Got inside and seemed to swell and press. But this was not happiness. This was not beauty. No! Oh, why had she gone skating this afternoon on Sabin's Pond?

She still wore her heavy white sweater and cap to match. The cap was pulled down over her forehead close above her eyes, as clear and blue as aquamarine and as full of sharp white lights now. She pulled off the sweater over her head, dragging the cap away also, and emerged, tossed and crumpled. She sat down before her dressing-table and gazed at herself again.

'Felix Nawn.' She repeated the words out loud slowly as if feeling of them with her voice. 'Felix Nawn.'

Felix. What a name! The boys called him 'Pasty' — because he was so pale and white, she supposed. Well — it was better than Felix. More American. Less to be made fun of. She was ashamed of his name. She was ashamed of him, yet sorry for the name too. Sorry for him. She was pleased and gratified by his strange, silent caring. Displeased and humiliated. Desired it, and desired to escape it. Sought it, and fought it. Was allured and repelled, was exhilarated and dejected, confident and afraid, all in one day — all in one moment, it seemed to her. Strong opposing feelings gripping

her simultaneously, like strong hands pulling on her in opposite directions. Why couldn't she shake the hands off? Why couldn't she shake Felix off?

Oh, let her be honest at least. She could shake him off, if she would. It was she who had suggested to the other girls that they go skating on Sabin's Pond this afternoon as they were crossing the top of Sabin's Hill on their way to the Park, where there was a hurdy-gurdy on Saturdays.

It was dusk. The skaters in the cove on the pond below were indistinguishable to the casual observer — like so many water-bugs, darting back and forth on the surface of a glassy pool. But not to Sheilah. Sheilah could always pick out Felix Nawn, from the top of Sabin's Hill, in a crowd of skaters below. Thick and bulky in outline. Long-overcoated. Slow, swooping glides. Usually to be found on the outskirts of a group. Usually alone.

'Why not stay here and skate, girls? It's so far to the Park, and already growing dark?' she had remarked.

The girls had acquiesced after a moment or two. She wished now they hadn't. Why was it afterwards there was always the same depression and regret? Before, always the same high animation and excitement? What would the girls think of her if they knew of the nagging curiosity that tugged and pulled at her lately, every time she saw Felix Nawn in a

group of skaters? They believed she simply tolerated Felix. She had heard one of them say, in explanation of her kindness to him, that Sheilah Miller wouldn't hurt the feelings of a stray mongrel, if he came licking her hand. They would be surprised if they knew how she schemed and connived to make it easy for Felix Nawn — shrinking, cowering, afraid of crowds (like a stray mongrel, indeed, and a stray mongrel who had had experience with boys and stones) — to approach her. More than to approach her! What would they whisper to each other if they knew of her ruse this afternoon?

Halfway down Sabin's Hill Sheilah had remarked that she was cold, and had gone back to the house, for an extra sweater, she told the girls. She had put on the extra sweater, true enough, but really she had gone back to change the long white wool gloves she wore, which bound her arms in soft thick armor to the elbow, for gloves of wrist length. She was as guilty as that!

Suddenly Sheilah leaned forward and buried her head in the curve of her arm on top of the litter of flat toilet silver on her dressing-table. Why hadn't her mother sent her away to school last fall? She had begged to go. Ever since she was thirteen years old Felix Nawn had hung above her, like a cloud, hiding more and more of her sunshine, darkening more and more of her sky, growing heavier and heavier with

the weight of what he took from her, as a cloud with the weight of what it takes from the earth.

2

Nothing new had happened this afternoon. Nothing unexpected. As usual Felix had lurked in her vicinity on the pond for half an hour or more before he spoke to her, gliding past her, time and time again, with no sign or look of recognition, biding his time like a hawk circling round and round a nest it means to rob, awaiting the propitious moment, before making its final swoop and dive.

Sheilah was standing quite alone when finally Felix Nawn slid up to her and, with averted eyes, and through lips that didn't move, mumbled a furtive 'Hello.'

'Hello,' Sheilah replied brightly. The word, as she spoke it, was a thing of beauty in comparison, clean-cut and full of lovely curves.

Felix murmured, still not looking at Sheilah, still through lips that didn't move, in a tone that didn't move either, 'Want to skate?'

'Yes,' said Sheilah, and again her voice made something exquisite out of a single word.

Sheilah had just been skating with Nevin Baldwin, knickerbockered and tight-sweatered, a veritable Mercury on the ice. One could almost see the wings at the back of his sleek, slender ankles, as

he skimmed over the surface, sprang into space, twisted, turned, and pirouetted with the perfect balance of a gyroscope.

Felix did not indulge in fancy skating nor in fancy skating clothes. Sheilah swept him from head to foot with a swift glance as he stood before her. Poor Felix! The long overcoat he wore was like a truck-driver's, who must protect himself well below the knees. It was black and heavy, and from beneath it appeared an expanse of the baggy legs of long trousers, turned up above stout boots, with mountainous toe-caps and thick soles, onto which were clamped substantial hockey-skates. He wore a dark wool, long-visored cap — Sheilah thought it was the longest visor she had ever seen on any cap — pulled down over his head as far as it would go. There was something resembling the silhouette of a long-beaked crow about Felix, as he stood before her, his arms close to his sides, like folded wings, for he still kept his hands in the deep side pockets of his overcoat. He took them out finally. They were bare and white, in the growing dark. Like sudden unexpected slugs in dark brown loam, Sheilah thought.

'Come on,' he said, and he held the white hands out to her.

She put hers into them and, with arms crossed, in the old-fashioned position, they struck off.

'The river's still clear,' Felix murmured.

'All right,' Sheilah acquiesced.

3

The houses on the hill had become a mass of twinkling pin-pricks when Sheilah and Felix sought the river. The stars in the sky, too. Silently, surreptitiously, the lights above and below had stolen into bloom, like a bed of evening primroses under cover of the dusk. The skaters in the cove had become dim and indistinct — a shadowy, mothlike swarm, that diminished as the night-lights increased, and much in the same baffling manner. It was easy to slip away from the crowd in the cove after it began to grow dark. The girls usually disbanded singly at the end of an afternoon of skating, lost to one another among the purple shapes and shadows of early nightfall.

The river ran north, away from the lights on Sabin's Hill, towards the lights of the big dipper in the sky, across a bare stretch of meadow-land that was swampy in the spring-time. There were seldom many people on the river. To-night there had been none in spite of the shining ribbon of satin it offered between its alder-shrouded banks.

Sheilah liked to skate with Felix Nawn over long, smooth stretches of glare ice. He could go gloriously fast. There was a rolling, swinging motion about his

speed that was like a sailboat on a windy day. And the accompanying song of the steel, cutting through the ice, grinding it into fine white powder, reminded Sheilah of the song of the keel, cutting through the water, grinding it into fine white spray, that rose up and slapped her deliciously in the face. But lately her simple joy in Felix Nawn's skating had been lost in a consuming interest in the stealth of his hands, grasping hers, his bare fingers creeping slowly bit by bit up beyond her short wool gloves to her unprotected wrists, where they would lie long and terrifyingly.

Sheilah raised her head now and stretched out her wrists and gazed at them. The doctor counted her heart-beats beside that little blue vein there. It was just as if Felix had laid his fingers against her bare heart!

Suddenly she pushed back her chair and stood up. She had heard her mother's step in the hall. Quickly she leaned and picked up her comb, and began dragging it through her tangled hair. Lovely hair. The color of beach-sand just after the tide has left it tawny and gold.

4

Her mother entered the room without knocking. Lately it seemed to Sheilah as if she must run away and hide when she heard her mother's advancing

steps coming down the hall, followed by the sudden turning of the knob and immediate throwing open of the door, without as much as a tap or a murmur of a 'by-your-leave.'

'Why, Sheilah, dear, you home?' her mother exclaimed now from the threshold. She was a woman of over fifty. Sheilah had been the last of her three children. Youth had definitely left her. She was thick in hip and shoulder, and her hair was the color of old pewter now. 'I didn't hear you come in.'

Sheilah replied, 'Yes, I'm home,' and then suddenly, vehemently, 'Mother, I wish you'd knock!'

'Knock?'

'Before coming into my room.'

'Why, Sheilah! What nonsense! Knock before coming into my own little daughter's room!'

'Oh, don't, mother.'

'What could she possibly have to hide from mother?'

'Oh, please, don't talk like that.'

'Like what?'

'That baby way you do! "Daughter and mother." Say "you and me." I can't bear it.'

'Why, Sheilah!'

Oh, of course she wouldn't understand!

'Well, I can't, and please knock. *Please.*'

'Why, Sheilah!'

Very quietly Sheilah's mother turned and closed the door behind her, went up close to Sheilah, took the comb out of her hand, and laid it on the dressing-table. Then put her arm around her shoulders.

'What is it, dear? Tell mother,' she murmured. Sheilah wanted to scream!

5

But she didn't scream. She didn't even push her mother away. It would hurt her mother dreadfully. She mustn't hurt her mother. She stood very still, as motionless as some wild animal, caught, and despairing escape. In silence she endured the soft, torturing stroking of her mother's hand on her arm, and the soft, torturing stroking of her mother's voice, as it pursued a familiar line of thought, each phrase and soft endearment of which were as familiar to Sheilah as the details of an often traveled road.

'What's troubling my little daughter? Tell mother. Between you and me there must never be any secrets. There must never be anything but sympathy and understanding.' Mrs. Miller owned half-a-dozen volumes on the modern methods of bringing up girls, and had read them all, marking the important paragraphs. 'We're such friends, you know. Come. Let's sit down, dear,' and she drew Sheilah, listless and unresisting, backwards a step or two to a rocking-chair, and sank down into it, pull-

ing Sheilah down onto her knees. 'There!' she exclaimed brightly, triumphantly. 'Now we're right! *Now* we can talk!' And she began to rock.

Sheilah sat rigidly on her mother's knees with her feet on the floor. It was like being made to ride a Shetland pony, after one has grown up, and one's legs were too long.

'Tell me, why should my little daughter want her mother to knock?'

Sheilah replied, 'Oh, don't knock if you'd rather not.'

How awful to feel, instead of the sympathy and understanding which her mother so wanted, distaste and something like disgust. Why, lately her feelings seemed determined to act contrary to every duty and ideal she had in the world. Liking Felix Nawn's hands on her wrists! Loathing her mother's arms around her waist!

'Tell me,' her mother persisted. 'Why did you want me to knock, Sheilah?'

'Oh, only because I was so hot and mussy after skating and I thought I might take a bath, and ——'

Her mother laughed lightly, playfully, flicking the end of Sheilah's nose.

'And didn't want her own mother to come in! Oh, Sheilah, Sheilah! Go ahead and take your bath, and we'll talk, like the two chums we are. You can tell me everything that has happened to-day. We

always tell each other everything that has happened.'

'Nothing's happened,' said Sheilah and stood up. By now her mother would be unaware that she was drawing away from her caresses. 'Mother,' she broke off, 'isn't there any chance at all of my going away to boarding-school?'

'Why, Sheilah, I thought we'd settled that long ago, you and father and I together — the way we always do.'

'No, you and father settled it, and I gave in, the way we always do. But I can't stay given in. I want to go awfully, mother.'

'Don't be unreasonable, Sheilah. No school that has any standing accepts girls in the middle of the year.'

'I don't care about its standing.'

'But, Sheilah, why should you go away? A girl with a lovely home like yours?'

'I'm so tired of everything around here.'

'Then you're probably overworking, dear. Possibly you're carrying too heavy a schedule at school. I'll look into it.'

'Please don't. It isn't that. I just want to get away. That's all. Please let me. Oh, please let me.'

She was vehement again. Her voice trembled. But Mrs. Miller's serenity was not in the least disturbed.

'We never arrive at conclusions,' calmly she went on quoting, 'by that old method of pleading and granting in our family. We confer and agree.'

But in spite of the announcement, 'Please let me go. Oh, please. Please,' Sheilah persisted, and there were tears in her eyes now.

'Oh, be calm, dear. Be calm,' purred Mrs. Miller in the quieting tone the books advised. 'Never let your emotions guide you, dear.'

Sheilah turned away. It was always like that. Oh, it was useless, useless. She was caught in a net — a soft, clinging net, and every effort she made to get out of it, simply seemed to bind the meshes closer and closer. Oh, well —

She crossed the room to the tiled bathroom adjoining, and flashed it full of white light. Her mother and father had had the bathroom put in for her two years ago. Her mother had sacrificed her sewing-room to provide Sheilah with this luxury. Her mother was always making such sacrifices. She deserved a daughter who could reward her without effort. Sheilah had to use all the self-control that she possessed, not to turn upon her mother now, and tell her that she wished she would go out of the room and leave her alone. Instead, she approached the pedestaled washstand, turned a porcelain handle, and gushed the shining bowl full of steaming water. Then shoved up her sleeves.

'Oh, aren't you going to take a bath?' her mother inquired. . .

'I guess not, after all. It's so late.'

Sheilah's mother sighed. Sheilah in her bath was beautiful. Like a magnolia blossom that blooms in the early spring, before there is any foliage to cover its white nakedness. Every curve and undulation was as firm and staunch as the upstanding petals of the young flower, and the surface of her as soft and satiny. Ever since she was a baby Mrs. Miller had loved to see Sheilah in her bath. Ever since she was a baby Sheilah hadn't minded. Until lately. Lately her mother's admiring gaze was torture to Sheilah.

CHAPTER II

I

THE Millers attended the Granite Congregational Church in Wallbridge. So did the Nawns. The Millers' pew was located on the center aisle about ten rows from the front. The Nawns' pew was located in the gallery over the left transept, next to the last row. Every Sunday, after the benediction had been said, a small and select reception took place in the vicinity of the Millers' pew. The prominent members of the church, and its chief financial supporters, all rented pews in the same general locality. The nave of the Granite Congregational Church seldom emptied under twenty minutes, but the sexton could begin to pick up the hymnals and scattered Orders-of-Service in the galleries and the transepts before the organist had left his loft.

As Sheilah sat in church the next morning with her head bowed gazing at her gloved hands folded in her lap, she wasn't listening to the fine big phrases of the long prayer. She was thinking how like a city the Granite Congregational Church was, with its aisles like streets, and numbered pews like houses, and desirable locations and less desirable. The location of the Nawns' pew in church corresponded to

the location of their house in the city. They lived in a grimy white house on Flower Street in Wallbridge, down near the Armory. The Armory district in Wallbridge was as lacking in distinction as the gallery transept in the Granite Congregational Church. Sheilah suffered whenever she passed Felix's house in nondescript Flower Street — suffered with a queer fierce feeling of protection for him. She suffered every Sunday whenever Mr. Spaulding, smiling benignly upon the important flock gathered immediately in front of him, raised his hand above their heads and invited them (ignoring the transepts completely) to join him in prayer. It made Sheilah want to be kinder, and kinder still, to Felix Nawn up there in his gallery seat.

He was always there, seated between his thin, quiet, mouselike father, and anything but thin, quiet, mouselike mother. You were always aware of Mrs. Nawn if you were under the same roof with her. She had a big unruly laugh, and a big unruly voice, and a big unruly figure, too. At various social functions at the church, at which coffee and salad and sandwiches had to be prepared in quantities, Mrs. Nawn was always very much in evidence, accomplishing more than all the other women on the committee put together, and to Sheilah's secret discomfort (Sheilah often waited on table at these functions) making more noise about it than all the

other women too. Even on Sunday morning in church, you were aware of Mrs. Nawn. She had some sort of chronic catarrhal difficulty evidently, and was constantly coughing and clearing her throat.

Beyond Mrs. Nawn sat Gretchen Nawn, Felix's older sister. Gretchen always wore big hats and fur pieces, and fuzzy wool coats, and ribbons and bows on her dresses. She never looked neat and trim, but as if shears would improve her, or a thorough plucking. Gretchen was engaged to be married to the sexton's son.

The sexton and Mr. Nawn appeared to be very intimate. Mr. Nawn often helped the sexton with the hymn-books and chairs after Sunday-School, and at the Sunday morning service Mr. Nawn passed the plate in the east gallery, while the sexton passed it in the west, but neither Mr. Nawn nor the sexton appeared before the pulpit afterwards. They delivered their boxes to a waiting deacon below in private, and stole modestly back to their seats.

Two years ago, when Sheilah had first heard that Gretchen Nawn was engaged to be married to the sexton's son, she made up her mind to find out about sextons. And plumbers. Mr. Nawn was a plumber. She made some inquiries of her mother. She was barely thirteen then.

'Would you ask the sexton and his wife to one

of your dinner-parties, mother?' No use asking straight out what the social position of sexton was. There would be sure to follow a long lecture on democracy.

Mrs. Miller, taken by surprise, had replied, 'Well, hardly. Why should I?' And then had added laughing, 'What a question, Sheilah!'

Sheilah had risked one more.

'Would you ask Mr. and Mrs. Nawn to a dinner-party?' After all, Mr. Nawn had a shop down-street with his name over it, and two telephone numbers.

But the question was one too many. Mrs. Miller was never long caught napping during this important 'formative stage' in Sheilah's development. Immediately she assumed her suave manner, and became the wise guiding parent of the books. If there was one thing she hoped to nip in the bud in Sheilah, it was snobbishness.

'You mean that big, good-hearted woman who goes to our church?'

Sheilah nodded.

'Why, if I thought Mrs. Nawn and her husband would enjoy one of my dinner-parties, certainly I would invite them. But I think they would feel rather out of place, and it wouldn't be kindness to make guests feel uncomfortable in our home, would it?'

So that was how the Nawns stood! And some day she might have to be a Nawn!

2

She could feel Felix above her there in the gallery now, gazing stealthily down upon her, his shoulders stooped, his head thrust forward, the saffron-colored light from a near-by stained-glass window, falling upon him, and making him look pale and sickly. Like a Chinaman. Yes, a Chinaman. That was what he was like, with his half-closed eyes, and yellow cast of color, and baggy clothes, and shuffling way of moving. Like a Chinaman in a laundry! A wave of repugnance for Felix swept over Sheilah, in the very wake of her wave of pity for him.

The long prayer came to an end. The minister gave out the number of a hymn. The organist played the opening bars of a martial anthem. Sheilah stood up with the hymn-book open before her.

There was a lancet window cut high up in the dark, cavernous region above the pulpit, a mere slit in the vaulted masonry, but big enough to admit a shaft of sunlight that came piercing down through the dust-motes of the dim interior of the church, and fell upon Sheilah. Sheilah felt the unexpected brightness on her (the window usually was covered by a shade), and looked up. And suddenly one of

those strange, unaccountable moments of elation, and release from fear, possessed her.

Queer about those moments, how they came on mysterious wings, soundless and unseen, and went likewise. Beauty in some form or other — a sunset, music, the first spring morning — would bring them to her. Or sharp physical sensations sometimes — fifty miles an hour in an open automobile with the wind tearing at her; or the intense heat of burning logs; or the intense cold of a sudden plunge into icy water. And always lately at those high ecstatic moments of hers she said the same thing to herself. She said it now. 'I'm going to win! I'm going to get over Felix Nawn!' And she gazed straight up into the dazzling shaft of light, and began to sing.

CHAPTER III

I

'LOOK at that girl over there,' whispered a man seated a few rows behind the Millers to a young woman whose hymn-book he was sharing.

The young woman raised her eyes.

'I see her.'

'Lovely, isn't she?' the man replied.

The woman nodded. Roger was always seeing lovely things everywhere. Promiscuously. She would have shrugged if she hadn't been in church.

'With that light on her, I mean, and that expression,' he explained.

Amusing Roger! It was only little Sheilah Miller standing in a shaft of sunlight that the sexton had been careless enough to allow inside the church to disturb the parishioners as it strayed from pew to pew, staring up into it and singing.

'Who was that girl?' Roger persisted as he walked home from church that noon with Cicely Morgan.

'Why, Roger, she's only a child. Still in the high-school.' And she did shrug now. 'You wouldn't be interested, my dear.'

Cicely was always quipping him like that lately.

He could scarcely admire a portrait of a beautiful woman in an art gallery, but that she saw something humorous about it.

‘I’m interested in everything that’s lovely.’

‘Oh, I’m aware of that,’ replied Cicely; ‘especially if it has any connection with the feminine sex,’ she added with a laugh that had a little sharp edge of scorn to it.

‘Nonsense. If the shaft of sunlight had picked out a young boy to make the one shining figure in the whole church, I’d have thought the effect just as extraordinary — that is, if he had looked up into it and begun to sing with the same amazing expression. Did you get the little girl’s expression?’

‘I get *yours*,’ Cicely replied with a sidelong glance and another shrug.

Roger thought best to ignore the persistent gibing.

‘She reminded me of some picture or other I’ve seen,’ he went on. ‘I can’t quite place it. I’ve been trying. Must be some sort of religious picture, for as she stood there looking up, with that heavenly expression I could almost see a circle of light in the dust-motes just over her head.’

‘Really you ought to have been a poet, Roger,’ remarked Cicely with a forbearing sigh.

‘Well, all poets don’t write verses.’

‘Or an artist. Then you could paint her.’

'Nor all artists paint pictures,' he added in the same vein.

Roger was a little tantalizing this morning.

They walked on in silence for half a block.

Then, 'What is the little high-school girl's name?' Roger inquired.

He was more than tantalizing! He was dull and lacking in perception. Wasn't he aware that she didn't want to talk about the little high-school girl now? Didn't he know that in ten minutes they would be at her front door, and that this was the only ten minutes that they would have alone before he left for his train? There was never any opportunity for conversation alone on Sunday once inside the heavy black-walnut doors of her father's house. Her father always monopolized Roger after dinner. Roger knew it. This wasn't the first Sunday he had spent with her.

'Her name,' Cicely replied, 'is Miller.' Cicely's voice was flat and uninteresting.

'Miller? Miller what?'

'Miller is her last name, Roger,' patiently Cicely explained.

'And what is her first?'

Really he was incorrigible!

'Sheilah.'

'Sheilah Miller. Sheilah Miller.' He said it twice. 'That's pretty.'

'Is it? Of course! I might arrange a meeting, Roger.'

'Don't be absurd, Cicely.'

('No, don't. Don't. For heaven's sake!') Cicely said to herself. But against her will, against her wish, she heard her voice remarking scathingly, 'I don't admire cradle-snatching, Roger.' And Roger inquiring in that surprised, naïve way of his, 'Why, what's gotten into you, Cicely?'

What indeed had gotten into her? Evidently something that hadn't gotten into him! That was what hurt so. That was what made her so unreasonable. Oh, she mustn't spoil things. The precious moments were sifting away. She made a tremendous effort.

'Oh, nothing — nothing,' she assured him lightly. 'Let's talk of something else. Isn't the fresh snow lovely? See it on all the little branches.'

And then Roger smashed straight into her heroic effort, head on, shattering it completely.

'I've got it!' he exclaimed exultingly. 'I know now!'

'Know what, Roger?'

'What she reminds me of — the little high-school girl, I mean. It's a window — a stained-glass window in a church I sometimes stray into. A memorial window to a young girl. Shows her kneeling, looking up a flight of steps, towards heaven, I suppose, for

there is an angel or two at the top of the steps, waiting for her. And a bright light streaming down on her. The look of — sort of relief on her face, was just like ——'

'Roger, please,' Cicely broke in. 'Spare me. I beg of you. I'm not interested. Really I'm not. Your flights of enthusiasm and young ragings are incomprehensible to me at times. And so are you. So are you!'

There! Now she'd broken it, the delicate thing she wanted more than anything in the world not to break. Roger was staring at her open-eyed, and exclaiming, 'Why, Cicely! Why, Cicely!' And seeing her flushed cheeks and smouldering eyes; and hearing her voice flash scorn and disapproval at him.

2

Ten minutes later Cicely in the haven of her own room was saying, too, as she covered her face with her hands, 'Why, Cicely! Why, Cicely!' The queenly, the immune Cicely Morgan brought down to the dust like this!

3

Roger Dallinger was very thoughtful as he went back to Boston on the four-o'clock train that afternoon. He hadn't intended to go back on the four-o'clock train. He had had a distinctly different plan

in his mind when he had started out in the morning — a plan slowly and carefully formed during the last fourteen days since last he had seen Cicely Morgan.

If the day proved fine (and it did), he had decided to stay over till the evening train this week, if Cicely would let him (and he had an idea she would), hire one of those old-fashioned bob-sleigh affairs, and escape with her after dinner to the white, quiet hills behind Wallbridge. And let happen what might! But he couldn't suggest such a plan to her after her eyes had flashed at him like that, just before dinner, and thereafter carefully and persistently avoided meeting his. Well, perhaps it was just as well.

Queer about Cicely. It seemed to annoy her lately if he saw too much beauty in anything. And he did like beauty — even little unimportant, pin-pricking bits of beauty, that interrupted you right in the midst of something serious, possibly, and made you exclaim about it. There was no one whose appreciation of beauty in art or music or literature was keener than Cicely Morgan's, but she seemed to think it unbecoming — 'maudlin' was the word she used once — to enthuse over trivial things. He was sorry for that. He was very anxious to discover no serious differences of opinion or feeling between himself and Cicely Morgan.

The first time he had been aware of this queer twist in her was one day last April, when he had interrupted her, to admire a group of birch trees on the marshy edge of a river. The birch trees were just coming into leaf. Their branches shone white and bare through a haze of faint green.

'Aren't they exquisite?' he had exclaimed — 'Like young girls in thin green gauze, wading.'

He thought it rather a pretty idea. But her reply had left him in no doubt as to her difference of opinion.

'You don't talk a bit like a lawyer. More like a lady-novelist,' she had retorted.

It had chilled him for a moment, but later he concluded that a little healthy intolerance of his nonsense would prove a good thing for him in the long run, and Cicely wasn't always intolerant of it, he observed. For instance, when later that same April day he had playfully likened her to a pansy — a big rich black pansy, with her soft, sooty-black eyes, and soft, sooty-black hair, and voice smooth as a velvet petal, she had flushed with pleasure, and hadn't said he talked like a lady-novelist.

That flush of pleasure had surprised Roger Dalinger. It had pleased him, too. He had supposed Cicely Morgan was as indifferent to his absurdities as the very flowers he likened her to. It had em-

boldened him to ask her if he might run up again to Wallbridge some Sunday and see her.

For six months now, Roger Dallinger had been running up to Wallbridge to see Cicely Morgan. As he sat staring out at the quiet, waiting hills, which all the week he had been picturing as a background to the most beautiful hour of his life, perhaps, it wasn't so much the immediate disappointment that the hills would wait in vain to-day that hurt him as the shocking possibility, that, instead of just barely having missed heaven, he may just barely have escaped a catastrophe.

Roger's route from the station to his room that night chanced to take him past the memorial window that had been the cause of Cicely's outburst. He had always seen the window from the inside before, with the daylight illuminating it. He couldn't have said definitely on what street it faced. But suddenly there it was before him! There was a service going on inside the church, and all its windows were glowing like soft dark jewels in antique settings.

He stopped and looked at the memorial window. Yes, to the life! The same light bright hair, the same flushed cheeks, lifted chin, and parted lips; and the same look of relief and joy blended in the wide-apart eyes, as if the fear of dying had completely disappeared. Really lovely! No good as glass, perhaps, but charming nevertheless. Now why, why

in heaven's name, shouldn't Cicely share his pleasure in a thing like that? Why, *she* was incomprehensible to *him*! Perhaps she wasn't the woman after all. Perhaps he wasn't the man.

CHAPTER IV

I

By night there was no trace of the ecstasy of which Roger Dallinger had caught a glimpse in Sheilah's face in the morning. It had disappeared entirely. So had the cause of it. That was the way it always was with her joy lately, Sheilah thought to herself, as she lay waiting for sleep to come to her that night.

It would begin to disappear almost immediately after its arrival and trickle away slowly bit by bit. She tried to hold it, but it was useless. Like trying to hold fine dry sand. It sifted out in spite of you, however tightly you grasped your fingers. Now, at midnight, there wasn't left a single shining grain of her confidence and courage of the morning. Instead there was fear again — thick soggy fear. Like heavy brown mud, which clings in clods, however hard you try to drop it.

Felix had walked home with Sheilah from the evening service of the Young People's guild that night. He had been walking home with Sheilah every Sunday night all winter now. Walking home from the Guild and skating on the river were the only times when she saw him alone. When the wave of courage had swept over Sheilah in the morning,

she had made up her mind that to-night she would escape the strange, silent walk through the dark. She had tried to escape it.

At dinner at noon she had remarked to her mother and father that she thought she wouldn't go to the Young People's Guild that evening. Unspoken resolves so often died in her heart. But her mother had objected.

'Why shouldn't you go? You always do.'

'I've studying to do for to-morrow.'

'Well, you have the whole afternoon. Anyway, Sheilah, you know how I feel about Sunday studying. I was brought up ——'

'I know.'

'I wouldn't interrupt, dear. I was brought up not to study on Sunday. You see what it leads to — neglecting your Sunday duties. You're a member of the Young People's Guild, and if all the members stayed at home to study, there wouldn't be any Guild, would there? You see the principle, dear, is this. The greatest good of the greatest ——'

'Oh, never mind. I'll go.'

'Oh, why make her, Dora?' interrupted Sheilah's father, suddenly alert. Always suddenly alert to certain tones in Sheilah's voice.

'Why, Sidney!'

Sidney was not supposed to disagree with Dora about Sheilah. Parents should stand together in all

decisions in regard to a girl's bringing-up. At least in her hearing.

'Well,' he shrugged, aware he had blundered, 'I only thought ——'

Dear, kind father!

'Never mind, father,' said Sheilah, and she shot him a little glance. He got it. He always got her little glances. 'I don't really care. I'll go.'

Anyhow, she had made the attempt. It would have resulted in one of those mysterious feuds between her mother and father — the kind you feel, though you can't actually see it, or hear it — if she had insisted upon staying at home.

2

The evening service of the Young People's Guild was held in the vestry of the church. Felix always sat in the back row up against the wall, with one or two other boys who had the same feeling as he, apparently, about seats, not only at church, but at school too, always choosing the back row — convenient for a hasty exit, and safe from observation. There had been an expanse of more than half a dozen empty rows of seats to-night between Felix and the little intimate group gathered around the platform. Sheilah had been aware of that expanse. That was the way it always was. Felix was a member of the Young People's Guild just as much as she was, but removed, outside.

It had been 'roll-call Sunday' to-day. Once a month, every member of the Guild must respond, to his or her name when it was called, by a prayer, or a verse of scripture, or remarks. It was always a painful Sunday for Sheilah. Not because of her own response — she liked speaking in public — but because of the mumble that issued from the back seat, in answer to the name of Felix Nawn. It was always the same mumble. Felix never varied his response. Those who had heard it many times knew that it was meant to be the first sentence of the Twenty-third Psalm.

To-night Nevin Baldwin had said to Sheilah, after the service (a half an hour after. She had had to stay for a committee meeting), 'Too bad to keep "The Lord-is-my-Shepherd" waiting all this time, Sheilah.'

Sheilah had flushed. She wasn't aware that any one knew about the dark walks home.

Nevin Baldwin was a tall, splendid sort of individual, with a gay, confident manner. Sheilah liked Nevin. Sheilah's mother liked Nevin too. And also Nevin's family. There was always a great deal of thought and preparation, Sheilah noticed, put into the dinner-party which her mother gave when the Baldwins were invited.

'If I didn't know you had a standing date with Pastey, alias The-Lord-is-my-Shepherd, every Sun-

day night,' Nevin went on now, 'I might see if you got home safely myself.'

'Might you?' she laughed, and turned away.

Not for anything in the world would Sheilah allow circumstances at this late date to rob her of what was waiting for her out there beyond the church door. She had tried to escape it when she had been several hours away from it. But it was too late now. Like drawing away from water when your lips are on the edge of the glass, and you are very thirsty. Poisonous water, too, perhaps.

3

Sheilah never knew at what corner, or from behind what shadow, Felix would appear. Sometimes she would be within only a few blocks of home before he joined her. To-night it was not until she had reached the hedge in front of the house that she saw the familiar outline of the shadow that made her heart jump so. They met at the wooden gate set in the opening of the hedge opposite the front door. The hedge was high and dense and covered with snow now. They stood hidden in the dark black shadow of it, close together.

'Hello,' murmured Felix, eyes downcast as if ashamed at being discovered.

'Hello.'

'I thought you weren't coming.'

'I had to stay for a committee meeting.'

'I waited at every corner.'

'Did you?'

And then silence — long, poignant, hurting silence — and immobility, broken finally by Felix taking a step nearer to Sheilah. Just one step. She leaned back a little against the hedge, not because Felix touched her, but there seemed sometimes to be a sort of aura emanating from him so that if he stood within a foot of her she felt him. She put one hand on the gate-rail, as if to support herself against the pressing aura, and Felix, whose hands till now had been hidden within the deep side pockets of his overcoat, also put one hand on the gate-rail. It was bare as usual.

'I must go in,' said Sheilah.

'Not yet.'

Again there was silence, and again, 'I must go in.' But she didn't make a motion towards it.

Felix moved his hand a little nearer hers, like a cat stealing up slowly upon a bird.

'What kind of fur is that?' he asked, indicating with a nod Sheilah's neck-piece. As if he cared!

'It's fox.' As if she cared!

'I thought fox was red.'

'Sometimes it's gray.'

'I never saw a gray fox.'

Under cover of such irrelevant remarks Felix

moved his hand nearer and nearer to Sheilah's, until it touched it. Only the edge of it, and she wore her gloves, too. But oh — oh!

'I must go in!' she exclaimed for the third time.

'Why?'

'Oh, I must! I must!'

'No, you mustn't.'

Sheilah dropped her free hand to her side. She had been holding it against her chest till then. There was in the helpless little gesture sudden submission. She stood very still afterwards without further protest and waited. Slowly Felix's fingers stole to her bare wrist, and lay there, cold. She had had to wrench herself away finally. Not that Felix grasped her wrist, or held or detained her in any way, but it was as if the aura, minute by minute, had swathed itself around them, and held her to him.

4

It was after midnight before Sheilah went to sleep, and she woke early, long before the gray dawn came creeping into the room. It was a dream that woke her. A terrible dream. She had dreamed the same dream several times before. It always woke her.

It was a dream about a Chinaman — a yellow-skinned, slant-eyed Chinaman, in baggy clothes, working in a garden. The garden didn't have many

things growing in it. Sheilah always wondered why, because the earth was so dark and rich. The Chinaman was picking up little shining white things out of the black earth and putting them in a deep side pocket in his coat. From a distance the shining white things looked like sea-shells. It was so strange to be hunting for sea-shells in a garden that Sheilah approached the Chinaman, and asked him what it was he was putting in his pocket. He mumbled something she couldn't understand, and, stretching out the opening of his pocket towards her, he motioned her to put her hand down in it and find out for herself. Sheilah plunged her hand and arm, bare to the elbow, down into the deep pocket. Immediately a shudder ran through her. There were cold, wet things in the pocket. She drew her hand out as quickly as she could, but to her dismay some of the cold, wet things were sticking to her wrist! Big white worms — slugs, she called them when she was a little girl. She tried to shake them off, but she couldn't! They clung. That was what woke her. The horror of those clinging white slugs!

CHAPTER V

I

MORNING and sunshine, and cold gushing water after steaming hot, always acted like magic on Sheilah's fears. As she stood bare-armed before her mirror the next morning pinning up her hair, she wondered why people talked about feeling out of sorts before breakfast. She thought it was the best time of the whole day. She had forgotten all about her dream. By the time she was seated before the piano in the living-room for her usual half-hour of practicing before breakfast, the fresh morning courage in her heart was circulating through her whole being.

It was a glorious, sparkling morning. Frost on the window-panes, twinkling in the sunshine like sea-sand with lots of mica-like bits in it. Blindingly white outdoors, and cold and brittle; but in here rosy-colored, and warm, and soft. And so good-smelling! Coffee and bacon! Oh, how good to be alive, on a cold winter morning, in a warm, rosy-colored room; with a beautiful Prelude, which she had worked weeks to conquer, running off her finger-tips like water! Why, of course she hadn't got to marry Felix Nawn! And she pressed down the

loud pedal with all her strength, and struck the last chord confidently.

It was in the same mood an hour later that Sheilah kissed her mother and father good-bye before going to school — her mother tenderly on her cheek, yielding generously to her arms, her father lightly on his forehead, bare within an inch of the top of his head now.

‘I am going to measure it with a tape-measure to-night,’ gayly Sheilah warned him. ‘It isn’t disappearing half fast enough to suit *me!* I adore bald babies, and bald fathers. I always want to kiss their heads,’ and she put her cheek down and rubbed it kitten-fashion against Sidney Miller’s shining brow.

‘Get away. Get away,’ he grumbled, and pushed her off.

But he loved her playful caresses, nevertheless, and lately her gay and sprightly moods had the same effect upon his spirits as placing a big order in business. For lately Sheilah seemed troubled a good deal of the time. Dora said it was nothing but a little physical weariness. Dora ought to know. Dora had read up a lot about girls.

Sheilah kissed her mother a second time before she left the room — her mother always liked to be kissed last — and gave her an extra squeeze. Afterwards a look passed between her mother and father which she didn’t fail to catch. She often caught it.

It was a look of love for her that amounted almost to worship. Oh, dear! That was the trouble about being an only child. It would be dreadful if she ever disappointed them. And she was worse than an only child (there had been a sister and a brother once), she was 'an only-child-left.' Well, she wasn't going to disappoint them!

The proof of it was at that moment inside her leather school-bag between the pages of her Cicero. It was in the form of a note written on a piece of ruled theme paper, folded to about the size of a lady's calling-card. Such was the size and style of all written communications that passed between the pupils of the Wallbridge high-school. On the outside of the note was written in pencil the name of Felix Nawn. Sheilah had written the note just after she had finished her practicing. She would slip it into Felix's desk at the first opportunity.

Last night by the gate in the shadow of the hedge, with Felix's fingers on her wrist, Sheilah had agreed to meet him with her skates next Saturday afternoon at five o'clock on the upper bend of the river, beyond the falls, by the ice-houses. If there was no skating, she had agreed to meet him without her skates. In her note Sheilah told Felix briefly that she had changed her mind about next Saturday, and then had added, with her early-morning courage still brave and bright, 'and please don't meet me

after the Guild any more either. Good-bye. Sheilah.'

Why did people talk about blue Mondays? Blue Mondays? Brave Mondays rather! A chance to put resolves to test again. The first day of a brand-new set of days. She would conquer this time!

2

Several pleasant things happened to Sheilah on her way to school that Monday morning. She hadn't gone two blocks when she met Cicely Morgan. Usually Cicely hardly noticed Sheilah, but this morning she stopped and talked to her.

It was a distinction to be a relative of Cicely Morgan's. (Sidney Miller and Cicely's father were first cousins.) It was a distinction to live in the same city with her and know her. When you said you came from Wallbridge, more likely than not the reply would be, 'Oh, really? Do you know Cicely Morgan?' Even Sheilah, whose experience in meeting strangers away from home was limited, had had the question repeated often enough for her to expect it. And she was aware that her reply, 'Yes. We're cousins,' would immediately quicken the stranger's interest. Usually there would follow a eulogy on her cousin's charms, in which Sheilah always enthusiastically joined. For Cicely had always been the most romantic figure in Sheilah's world.

She was very beautiful! Of course. With those eyes. They were as big as pools. Sheilah hardly dared to look at them for fear Cicely would catch her staring as if they were a birth-mark. They were brown, like the dark rich brown of after-dinner coffee, and liquid like coffee, and full of the same mahogany lights, when the sun shone on them. They were fringed with long lashes that had that queer sooty look as if there was black pollen on them. You wondered why the pollen didn't shake off on the rose-colored petal of Cicely's smooth cheek. Her hair was reddish black like her eyes, and always lay in lovely nestling curves and waves around her neck and forehead. Cicely had grown up with beauty, and with the homage that goes with it. She had the smooth, take-it-for-granted manner of a queen.

She had been 'out' several years now. The fame of the success of that first winter of hers in Boston, in Philadelphia, in New York, in Washington (she had friends everywhere) had been repeated over and over again to Sheilah. Most frequently by Sheilah's mother. So frequently, in fact, and so explicitly, that Sheilah had become aware that her mother desired some such success for her! And actually believed it possible. Ridiculous! Why, she was no more like Cicely than a daisy is like a rose, or a sparrow like a tanager.

'Good-morning, Sheilah,' said Cicely, and stopped in front of Sheilah, blocking the narrow snow-walled way. 'In a hurry?'

'No. Not a bit. Want me to do anything?'

'Oh, no. Off to school?'

Sheilah nodded. 'Yes.' And flushed. Cicely was looking at her so closely.

'Why, you've grown up, Sheilah!' she said finally, and then extending one of her hands, a small, delicate, perfectly gloved hand, and placing it lightly on Sheilah's arm, she added, in a sort of undertone as if it was a confidence, 'And you've grown up pretty!'

'Oh, no!'

'Oh, yes!' And then, tossing her lovely head — small and compact in a close turban, as perfect in outline as that of a small thoroughbred Arabian horse — 'And I'm not the only one who thinks so either,' she added. A sudden irresistible desire to refer to Roger — simply to refer to him — possessed Cicely.

'Why, what do you mean?'

'Some one at church yesterday thought you were pretty, too.'

Sheilah flushed in earnest now.

'Why, *who*?'

'Oh, a friend of mine,' she laughed. (Was he a friend of hers? Still? 'Oh, come back, come back,

Roger, and be a friend of mine still. Come back please, and let me say I think she's pretty, too.')

'What friend?'

'I've a good mind to tell you,' said Cicely. And then stopped short.

What madness had got hold of her that made her want to talk about Roger to anybody — to anybody at all, if there existed the least shadow of an excuse? To a child, to a mere slip of a girl. Even, it seemed, if the mere slip of a girl chanced to be the cause of a quarrel with Roger. Even, moreover, if it required being very kind and generous to the mere slip of a girl, sharing with her praise and admiration that she had wanted all for herself. Oh, the irony of fate! That she, Cicely Morgan, who had always had more praise and admiration than she had wanted from men, should, from the only man who had ever touched her heart, want more than was offered!

'Do tell me, Cicely,' Sheilah was still urging.

'All right,' she acquiesced. 'His name,' she announced casually enough, 'is Roger Dallinger.'

'Roger Dallinger? I never heard of him. Is he somebody I should have heard of? Is he somebody wonderful?'

Cicely hesitated a moment and looked away.

'Wonderful,' she said at last, and her eyes ——

'Why, Cicely, is it somebody you ——' Sheilah stopped abruptly, confused. 'Oh, Cicely, we've all

wondered who it would be finally. There've been so many! Is he — is he ——'

Cicely looked at Sheilah aghast for a moment, then broke into a laugh.

'Oh, no,' she replied. 'He's not *that!* Romantic child! Not what you think!' And she laughed harder. 'I should say not! I should hope not! Poor Roger! Poor Roger!' And then suddenly (somehow she must change the subject. She wasn't to be trusted this morning apparently), 'Come and see me sometime,' she said.

'Really? Do you mean it?' eagerly Sheilah picked it up.

'Why, surely!'

How amusing that Sheilah should be so pleased. She really was a sweet child, after all! Her eyes worshiped and paid homage like a man's.

3

Sheilah walked on air for the next few blocks. How adorable Cicely was! No wonder every man she met fell in love with her. Sheilah could easily imagine falling in love with her herself. She had always admired Cicely, but until to-day *she* had been simply part of a familiar scene to Cicely, no more to be noticed or remarked upon than one of the telegraph-poles or bare trees that bordered the sidewalk.

Sheilah was still walking on air when somebody sang out from behind in a loud and cheery voice, 'Hello there, Sheilah Miller! What's the rush?' Sheilah stopped and turned around. It was Nevin Baldwin.

He wore light brown knickerbockers of a rough wiry texture, heavy golf stockings to match, and a thin clinging sweater of the same Irish-terrier tan over a soft white shirt. And no hat. He had run out from his front door quickly, without preparation apparently, when he saw Sheilah pass by the corner of the street. His hands were bare also. But not white, like Felix Nawn's. Red — dark brownish red. The color of rocks at the seashore. And looked as hard and firm.

'What do you want?' asked Sheilah.

'For-the-love-of-Mike, do I have to *want* something?'

'Oh, not at all. Let's sit down under the apple-blossoms and chat.'

'Come on. I'll walk along with you.'

'That way? Do you know it's only four above?' She glanced at his bare head. His thick, curly, close-cut hair was shining with a recent application of water and brushes. 'It's beautiful, I know,' she tittered, 'but it will freeze out here.'

'I'll risk it. Come on. Give me that bag.'

'Don't you put on airs, Nevin, just because you've

gone away to a boarding-school! You know very well you wouldn't have offered to carry any high-school girl's bag for her last year if you were to die for it. Nor walk to school with her either. Go on back into the house. Your teeth are chattering.'

'From sheer nervousness.'

'And I suppose it's from nervousness your hands are turning purple.'

'Well, will you wait till I go back and put something on?'

'Of course I won't. Do you think I want to appear with you traipsing along beside me, carrying my school-bag, as if I had a weak back?'

'But I want to ask you something.'

'Well, ask it. And do hurry.' She glanced at his head. 'It is already coated,' she warned.

'It's an invitation,' he said. He became suddenly serious, and a little self-conscious. 'I've just heard I can ask a girl for next Saturday. Our school Prom, you know. I thought I was out of it because of this darned quarantine business' (Nevin had been at home for over a week because of an exposure to measles), 'but the doctor says I can go back to school to-morrow, and that I'm perfectly all right for the dance Saturday. I want you to be my girl, Sheilah. I mean my girl at the dance,' he flushed, suddenly brownish red like his hands. 'My mother,' he hurried on, 'will chaperon you. She is

going to Boston on the early train to-day, but she's going to call your mother up about it when she gets back. That is, if you — if you want to come.'

Want to come? Why, it was his school's biggest dance! Want to come? Nevin knew lots of out-of-town girls. Nevin went to house-parties. But he was asking *her*! And his mother was asking her too! It had all been talked over and planned between them! Her first dance at a boys' boarding-school! With Nevin Baldwin! Chaperoned by Mrs. Baldwin! How pleased her mother would be!

'Why, Nevin!' Sheilah gasped, and her voice was as gentle as her eyes were starry.

He stared at her. That was the way she was, when she was loveliest. Her voice was like — her eyes were like — Well, he didn't know what they were like, but she was simply beautiful!

'Why, Nevin,' she exclaimed again, 'do you really want me!'

He glanced away, as you have to from very bright shining things sometimes. 'Naturally,' he said in a low voice.

Sheilah kept right on shining at him without saying a word.

'Do you want to come?' And he tried looking at her again.

Her eyes had grown soft. She gave a little broken laugh. 'Naturally,' she mocked gently.

And they both laughed then out loud, together.

'Well, then,' Nevin exclaimed, resuming his old manner, 'that's all I've got to say to you. Now trot along to school, little girl.'

'Nevin, I think it's awfully nice of you. I ——'

'Cut it. Toddle along, or you'll get a tardy mark, dearie.'

'But, Nevin ——'

'Say, do you want me to freeze to death?'

He was running back to his house now. Sheilah turned. Her whole world, inside and out, was shining white.

CHAPTER VI

I

SHEILAH was glad that her note to Felix had actually been written before she had met Nevin. She didn't approve of girls who slipped out of an engagement already made, in order to accept a more attractive one. She could have explained to any ordinary boy, with whom she had had an ordinary engagement like skating, about the dance, of course, and he would have understood and let her off. But Felix wasn't ordinary. The engagement wasn't ordinary.

She was glad she wouldn't be anywhere around when he received her note. He would go off somewhere alone with it, she supposed, and read it over and over again. And next Saturday, when she was having a marvelous time with Nevin Baldwin and all Nevin's marvelous friends at his fashionable school, Felix would be skating all alone somewhere on the dark river, still hurt and wondering. Oh, dear! She hated to hurt people — and animals — dumb, silent creatures. Well, she mustn't sentimentalize. It was only by chance that she would be having a marvelous time while Felix was suffering.

She would deliver the note, before Opening Exercises if there was time. There was time! Just barely.

Already the last bell had begun to ring when Sheilah lifted the cover of Felix Nawn's desk in his study-room on the third floor, and laid the note in plain view, underneath an ink-eraser on his pencil-rack.

But Felix never got that note. There seemed to be a sort of conspiracy working against Sheilah's brave efforts to break off her relations with him. He didn't go to his study-room after Opening Exercises, as was his custom. It was Monday, and on Mondays he went directly to the manual-training building. He didn't go to his study-room even before recess. That was because of the tragedy that took place during the Third Period. He was too stunned to go anywhere then. He just sat where they left him.

2

The tragedy would never have taken place if Miss Bigelow, one of the Latin teachers, hadn't tripped on a piece of loose rubber on the stairs, and sprained her ankle. Felix was one of the pupils in the class to which she had been hurrying when she fell. Fifteen minutes later it was announced to the waiting class, eagerly hoping for release, that it would join Division A in Latin this morning in Room 12 on the floor below. Miss Marks would conduct the recitation of the combined divisions. Sheilah was in Division A. Felix had never been in

any division in any subject with Sheilah. He had never recited in the same room with her.

As he entered Room 12 at the end of the line of the dozen or so pupils of his division, he shuffled into the brightness, keeping his eyes downcast, yet seeing Sheilah too, over there by the window in the sunlight. He looked for a back seat, but there was none empty. He was obliged to take a front one immediately opposite the platform. He slid down underneath the desk as far out of sight as he could get. But it didn't cover him up very well. Why hadn't he escaped when he had the chance out there in the hall, and suffer the consequences? Even when he had prepared his lesson in Latin — spent long laborious hours with dictionary and grammar, and under Miss Bigelow's kind and gentle protection, he was never anything but awkward and shy. But to-day he had not prepared his Latin at all. He had sat with the book before him for a whole hour last night — true — after he had left Sheilah, but his thoughts, his feelings —. He had given it up finally, and shoved the book away. If it weren't for Sheilah, Felix wouldn't be taking Latin at all. It was so that she needn't be ashamed of him that he was trying so hard to go to college. He glanced at the door. Too late to escape now. Well, perhaps — possibly — there was just a chance that he might not be called.

But fate was not so kind. Miss Marks was very thorough and efficient, and very different from Miss Bigelow. She never felt kindness for dullness, nor protection for failure. She considered it her duty to expose unprepared lessons, mistakes, and stupidity whenever she had the opportunity.

As soon as the pupils in the visiting division were settled, Miss Marks told them to take places at the blackboard and copy their prepared home-work (twelve sentences, she had been informed, on such and such a page), while she, in the meanwhile, continued with the recitation with her own division. Later the combined divisions would correct the copied sentences.

Felix hadn't a single sentence to copy! It was out of the question for him to attempt impromptu work in Latin composition. He stood in hopeless dejection before the great black, blank, space before him, chalk in one hand, book in the other, hot all over, painfully conscious of the rapid, efficient scratching going on on either side of him, painfully conscious of the disgrace about to befall him when the blank space before him was discovered with his name signed to it. Perhaps it would be well to tell Miss Marks that he was unprepared. He turned to do so. He tried to do so. But she wasn't looking at him. No one was looking at him.

It was when Felix realized that no one was looking

at him that he saw his way out. Pamela Hyde was standing on one side of Felix. She had just finished her first sentence. Pamela stood at the head of her division in Latin. Why, Sheilah needn't see him fail after all!

3

Fifteen minutes later when Pamela Hyde took her seat she laid a piece of folded paper on Miss Marks's desk.

'Read it later,' she said in a low tone, holding her head very high, her outraged sense of right making her press her thin lips together tightly. Pamela was a plain girl, with a high, shining forehead with pimples on it.

Miss Marks read Pamela's note while Cicero continued to declaim from a rear seat. 'I made my mistakes on purpose. Pamela Hyde,' it said.

Cautiously, Cicero still declaiming, Miss Marks's eyes traveled to Pamela's mistakes. And to the mistakes beside Pamela's!

Afterwards a swift glance of complete comprehension passed between Miss Marks and Pamela Hyde. They were two of a kind.

Miss Marks waited till near the end of the period before executing Felix. It was her custom to correct written work on the board with a piece of chalk, underlining the mistakes with little sharp digs at the

board, accompanied by monosyllabic exclamations, such as 'Mood! Tense! Careless! Case! Vocabulary! Inexcusable!' spitting out the single words explosively as if they were expletives, while the class watched and listened. Felix, his eyes upon the clock, had begun to think that his sentences might escape correction entirely, when Miss Marks skipped several intervening exercises on the board and approached Pamela Hyde's in the corner.

'One of our best students in Latin in the high-school,' she remarked, and proceeded to amaze the class with the best student's fantastic exhibition. With the exception of Pamela's first sentence there were scarcely three words in succession that escaped the chalk. Pamela's work fairly bristled with mistakes — absurd, ridiculous mistakes. And once an entirely different sentence from another exercise.

Every pupil in the room stared bewildered. What had happened to Pamela Hyde? She couldn't be playing a practical joke on Miss Marks, could she? No. Not Pamela. She wasn't the kind of girl to play practical jokes on anybody in authority. What was her motive? Felix knew before Miss Marks had reached Pamela's third sentence.

Three minutes later and the flaying chalk was stabbing at his sentences, underlining, with rapid accuracy, absurdity after absurdity identical to Pamela Hyde's. Blindly, trustfully, Felix had followed

Pamela, only occasionally changing an ending in a weak attempt at concealment. Even the sentence from another exercise appeared in his copy! The class became tensely quiet as the truth of the situation slowly dawned. There was not even the shifting of a hand or foot when Miss Marks launched forth into an impassioned speech of contempt and condemnation. Miss Marks believed in public ignominy for so despicable a creature as a cheat. 'Robber, liar, coward — all in one,' she said (she had spoken on the subject before), 'and poor sportsman, too!'

The merciful bell put an end to Felix's torture at last. Awed and shocked, the pupils of the two divisions gathered their books together and silently trooped out of the room, looking askance at Felix Nawn as they passed him, cowering in his seat, his big body slid down as far as it would go beneath the inadequate shelter of the desk, his shoulders crumpled forward, his head sunk between them — a shapeless mound of something alive, trying to hide itself. Like a dog whipped, thought Miss Marks. Like a Stephen stoned, thought Sheilah.

4

It was the recess-hour. All the classrooms were emptying into the halls. Soon there were little eager whispering groups everywhere. They gathered in

close, intimate circles and oh'd and ah'd in undertones. The biggest circle of all to-day gathered around Pamela Hyde. She became red-cheeked with the excitement of her sudden importance. Everybody seemed to think her very clever to have caught a cheat like that.

Sheilah didn't think her clever. Sheilah thought her mean and contemptible. Why, Pamela Hyde had cheated too! She had cheated Felix — a fellow-student, a comrade, and that was worse sportsmanship than cheating teachers, who were often enemies. She would tell her so, sometime, too! Not now. *Now* she would go to Felix. He was alone in there — despised and scorned, and stared at. She was something special to Felix. He was something special to her. They both knew it. Only a girl as mean and contemptible as Pamela Hyde would desert Felix now.

Sheilah crossed the hall from the classroom opposite, where she had been hovering, and reëntered Room 12. She closed the door behind her, standing for a moment with her back against it, gazing at Felix.

He didn't look up, but he was conscious of the sudden relief of the closed door, and muffling of the buzz and chatter. He was conscious, too, a moment later of the soft, swishing sound of a felt eraser rubbing against a blackboard. Sheilah was erasing

Felix's exercise and Pamela Hyde's beside it, with long, strong sweeps of her arm.

Afterwards she turned, covered with the white dust of Felix's disgrace, and looked at him. He was still sitting there just as Miss Marks had left him, shoulders bent, head drooping. She went over to him.

'Oh, why did you do it, Felix?'

'For you,' he murmured; 'I didn't want to fail before you.'

5

She left him almost immediately, carefully reclosing the door behind her, and hurried up the main stairway, to the third floor. She was breathless when she reached Felix's study-room. There was a group of boys in one corner of the room, eating sandwiches and apples, but she didn't hesitate. She went immediately to Felix's desk and raised the cover. No! He hadn't read her note yet! There it was, untouched, still underneath the ink-eraser on the pencil-rack, just as she had left it in the early morning.

She opened it. Why, of course Felix mustn't read it now! He would think she had written it because he had cheated, and he had cheated for her! Quickly she tore off the top portion of the paper, and crumpled it up. Then in the blank space left, she

wrote another note to Felix: 'Dear Felix, don't forget our engagement next Saturday. I will be there at four o'clock. Sheilah.' Refolded it, and laid it back again underneath the ink-eraser.

CHAPTER VII

I

SHEILAH stopped at Nevin Baldwin's on her way home from school. Nevin opened the door himself, so she couldn't leave the note of explanation she had written to him. She was sorry. It would have been easier.

'Hello, Sheilah. I saw you coming,' he exclaimed, eyes shining at her. 'I don't seem to remember having had a call from you before, though all the other girls have paid their respects, of course! Say, that scarf of yours is a peach.'

It was red. So were Sheilah's cheeks. It was really her cheeks Nevin wanted to remark upon.

'Has your mother gotten back from Boston yet?' Sheilah inquired.

'Nope, but dad's inside having lunch, if it's a chaperon you're thinking about. But I promise to behave. Come on in.'

'Well,' calmly Sheilah went on, impervious to Nevin's facetiousness, 'I just stopped to ask you to tell your mother please not to call up my mother. About next Saturday, I mean. Because ——' She hesitated.

Nevin had been lolling nonchalantly against the

casing of the door, but now he stood up straight, and his manner became as serious as it had been light and gay.

'What's the idea?'

'I can't go Saturday, after all.'

'What's the matter?'

'I have another engagement.'

'You didn't say anything about another engagement this morning.'

'I didn't actually have it this morning.'

'Oh, it's come up since!'

'No, it hasn't *exactly* come up since. I thought — You see — I —' She gave it up at last.

'Well, I can't go anyway, Nevin.'

'Oh, I get the idea. You don't have to hammer it in.'

He was holding himself straight and taut, shoulders squared, head high. Sheilah glanced at him. His eyes were flashing, but not with fun now.

'I'm ever so sorry. It was awfully good of you.'

He gave a little laugh and shrug.

'Oh, that's all right.'

'I hope you understand.'

'Perfectly. Better luck next time.'

But as Sheilah turned and left Nevin, she felt almost sure that there would never be a 'next time.'

She walked home slowly. The crisp sunlight of early morning had been drooping ever since recess —

the clean-cut outline of the shadows on the snow growing blurred and faint. Disappearing entirely finally. There was a soft, mouldy-gray cloudiness over everything now. It was much warmer. It began to snow in the early evening. The snow turned into rain during the night. Sheilah, again lying awake, could hear it, pattering against her window-pane.

The next morning when she went to school, the firm white drifts of the morning before were shrunken, like an old person's skin over muscles that have lost their tone, and their soft silky surface had become coarse-grained and gray.

2

Mrs. Miller always remembered that it was during the January thaw that she became seriously concerned about Sheilah. That was several weeks before Sheilah's actual 'breakdown' (she always referred to it as Sheilah's 'breakdown'), so she hadn't been careless or unobservant. She remembered it was during the January thaw because the walking was so frightful on the morning when she went over to the high-school to talk to Mr. Bond, the principal, about Sheilah's work.

All the fall Sheilah hadn't been eating very well, but 'the books' said it was wiser to ignore the fluctuations of a growing girl's appetite than to central-

ize her attention on it by constant nagging. But when Mrs. Miller discovered Sheilah wasn't sleeping she decided it was time to act.

Mrs. Miller had gotten up one night to see if Sheilah was properly covered, and had found her propped up in bed with a book and paper and pencil.

'Why, my dear child, whatever are you doing?'

'Just algebra, mother.'

'At this hour! Sheilah, is your algebra bothering you?'

'No, not a bit,' Sheilah had replied calmly.

'And so you are working on it at two o'clock in the morning!'

'Yes,' smiled Sheilah.

At the earliest possible moment Mrs. Miller called up Mr. Bond and made an appointment. She would tell him that Sheilah must drop algebra. She had never wanted her to go to college, anyway. But Mr. Bond told Mrs. Miller that Sheilah was one of the best students in algebra in the high-school. They discussed her other work. She was doing well in everything. He had no complaint to make of Sheilah. So Mrs. Miller went to talk to John Sheldon finally.

3

Only a few of John Sheldon's patients 'consulted' him. Most of them, like Dora, just went to talk to

him. There was no man in Wallbridge more in demand than John Sheldon. And no man more modest and self-effacing. Once he had overheard Charlotte, his wife, early in their married career, refer to him to an acquaintance as 'the doctor.' 'As if,' he had laughed at her, 'there was only one doctor in town.' So after that she usually said just John. All of his friends said just John too. Many of them felt for him a deep sense of gratitude for help he had given them through some ordeal or other in the past, but they seldom expressed it. He disliked praise for doing what was his job, he said, and at the least sign of an encomium, always laughed and changed the subject, launching quickly into the last funny story he had heard.

There were many 'specialists' now in Wallbridge, as everywhere else. But John Sheldon was 'a general man,' and insisted on calling himself such. He had heard Charlotte at a dinner-party tell a stranger once that her husband was a diagnostician. 'No such thing!' he had denied, 'just an old-fashioned family doc.' He was always belittling himself, and calling himself uncomplimentary names, if he had a chance.

He bore few of the signs of success. Unlike the specialists he could always be gotten at *some* hour during his elastic twenty-four. And he never seemed to be in a hurry, often spending an extra

fifteen minutes or so with a patient to talk and swap stories, although it might mean no lunch.

There was a stuffed trout hanging on the rather dingy walls of his office. He had caught it twenty years ago. He had a passion for fishing. Some day he meant to go fishing again, when he could afford it. He had several expensive children to bring up, and one thing John Sheldon *didn't* know, was how to make money. The specialists, who came over from Boston, were always calling him in to relieve symptoms while they were considering causes. Often the symptoms under his treatment (though he insisted it was under Nature's) would disappear, and the cause would never be discovered at all. But still he couldn't bring himself to charge over five dollars a call, in spite of the specialists' five hundred.

Dora stared at the one stuffed trout while she waited for John to finish a conversation over the telephone dealing with the details of a baby's digestive activities. She had been waiting for five minutes. It must be a very stupid woman on the other end of the line. John Sheldon had to repeat everything he said about three times. But judging from the tone of his voice, he might have been chatting about books and plays with the woman at an afternoon tea-table. Charlotte often told him he didn't have a bit of a professional manner.

When finally he hung up the receiver (he had al-

ready nodded and smiled at Dora as she came in), he got up and went over to her, and shook hands.

'Hello, Dora,' he said. They'd known each other for years. 'Awfully nice to see you,' just as if her call was a pleasure to him. And he didn't say, 'What can I do for you?'

4

'I've come to talk to you about Sheilah. We're worried about her,' said Dora.

John Sheldon sat down.

'Tell me about it,' he replied, and leaned back in his chair, and folded his hands. He didn't even twiddle a pencil.

'Well, she isn't eating and she isn't sleeping,' Dora went on, 'and she is losing weight. And I've caught her crying several times. When I ask her what is the matter she just says, "Nothing. Please leave me alone." So unlike her. We've always been the closest mother and daughter in the world. But lately I feel as if — well, almost as if she didn't want me around sometimes. I thought it might be her school work. Two nights ago I caught her doing algebra at two o'clock in the morning, but Mr. Bond says she's doing excellent work in algebra. Last night I heard her crying and when I tried to open her door it was locked! And she wouldn't unlock it. Why, I was frightened. I woke up Sidney and told

him, but he thought I'd better let her alone. So I did. This morning when she came down to breakfast she ate practically nothing. She says food makes her feel sick. I read about a girl who had a grumbling appendix. It didn't bother her much. But she had the operation, and afterwards she was an entirely different creature. It changed her whole disposition. Sheilah has had stomach upsets occasionally lately. Possibly *she* has a grumbling appendix.'

John Sheldon didn't smile. He nodded, gravely attentive.

'Possibly. Why don't I drop in to-morrow sometime, and look her over? We'll soon find out.'

'Oh, I wish you would!'

Already Dora felt better about Sheilah. It was always like that after talking to John Sheldon.

5

Sheilah had never thought of John Sheldon as a human being. To her he was more like a clinical thermometer, something you referred to when you were sick, as a matter of habit. Or a surgical instrument, perhaps. Because he was so clean. He even smelled clean. Like a roll of sterilized gauze when you first open it. Particularly his hands were like a surgical instrument — firm as steel, smooth as polished nickel, and unhesitating. You could al-

ways trust John Sheldon's hands. They never drew back if you jerked, or slipped if you twinged.

It was because John Sheldon was so much like an instrument that you didn't mind telling him things about your body. But it had never occurred to Sheilah to talk to him about anything else. Until he came to examine her for appendicitis. And then suddenly he became quite different from an instrument. No instrument could have understood about the algebra.

John Sheldon was holding her hand in his firm, clinical grasp, taking her pulse, she supposed, when he asked her about the algebra, casually, in an off-hand manner.

'Your mother tells me you're working on your algebra late at night. In bed.'

'Yes.'

'Bothering you a little, is it?'

'No, it isn't bothering me at all. I told mother it wasn't.'

'Then why work on it in the middle of the night?' he asked casually, his eyes on his investigating fingers.

'*Because* it doesn't bother me,' said Sheilah.

'*Because* it doesn't bother you,' he paused a moment. 'Oh, I see!' he exclaimed softly. 'To put yourself to sleep. Instead of counting sheep.'

She looked up to him gratefully.

'Yes,' she sighed. 'Instead of counting sheep.'

'Things loom up pretty big about two A.M., don't they, if there's something on your mind?'

'There's nothing on my mind.'

John Sheldon laid down Sheilah's hand beside her on the bed, as if it had been a book, or something unalive, and took out of his bag near by an accessory that was almost as much a part of him as his glasses. He slipped it over his head, but he didn't put the little hard rubber ends into his ears. Not immediately. First he said, 'Well, even if there was something on your mind, you don't have to tell *me*. I'm here just to help you sleep better, Sheilah, and eat better. That's what your mother has asked me to come here to do.'

Suddenly Sheilah turned towards him and burst out, 'Oh, mother's the trouble, partly,' and then stopped.

John Sheldon waited. He didn't urge. He leaned back in his chair and waited.

'I can't bear to have mother touch me lately. I lock my door at night for fear she'll come in, and talk to me, and stroke my arm, and I'll burst out and tell her to go away. It would hurt her dreadfully if I did, for she thinks we're especially sympathetic. And we used to be. I didn't use to mind her coming in, but now — oh, now — isn't it awful? — I don't want her near me!'

'Not so very awful,' commented John Sheldon, turning his eyes away from Sheilah's, so pleading and full of pain. Often he had to turn his eyes away from suffering not to show his sympathy. It was the ability to maintain an impersonal attitude that made confidences run fluently sometimes.

'You see she expects so much of me,' Sheilah went on. 'I'm all she has, and if I should make a mistake — if I should disappoint her — and I'm almost certain I'm going to make a mistake — that I'm going to disappoint her —— But why do I tell you all this?' She turned as suddenly away from John Sheldon as she had towards him a moment before.

He said quietly, prosaically, 'Simply because it is my business to be told, I guess. Part of my job, if you feel like telling anybody.'

'Oh, I'm so unhappy! I'm so unhappy!' she cried out. And she turned and buried her face in the pillow, and her shoulders shook with silent sobbing.

John Sheldon didn't put his hands on her. There was no sign of pity from him.

'It's a good idea to cry,' he commented, in a professional voice, and went over to the window and looked out. Later he came back to her. 'Now, shall I do a little listening, Sheilah?' he asked her. Still later, before he left her, 'Get up and dress and go down to dinner when I go,' he said. 'I'm coming

around again to-morrow, after school. I've got a case out in North Wallbridge. Perhaps you'll run out with me in the car. It's bad going, but I guess we can make it.'

CHAPTER VIII

I

IT was after that drive with Sheilah that John Sheldon advised Dora to send her away.

Dora demurred. 'It would mean leaving Sidney alone here, but of course it's best for Sheilah, I suppose we can go. How long should you want us to be gone?'

'Oh, I should advise Sheilah's going away alone, I think, and for an indefinite period. To a girl's school or something of that sort.'

'She's wanted to go for two years. But I don't believe in boarding-schools for girls, John, who have good homes and good mothers. I can't bear to think of sending Sheilah away — the only child we've got, just when she's forming her life ideals. I want to be near by, and *help* form them. I think it's a mother's duty. Anyhow, there's no school of any standing that takes new girls in the spring term. Why, it seems to me a terribly radical thing for you to advise, just because Sheilah isn't sleeping very well and is a little run-down. Unless you think — Is it a nervous breakdown, John?'

'Not yet.'

'If it's a nervous breakdown, what's the cause of it?' demanded Dora.

'It isn't a nervous breakdown, and I don't know what is troubling her. She may not know herself. She told me about a queer dream that keeps recurring, but it is beyond me to interpret it. I'm not a neurologist, Dora. I can send you to one, though, and possibly he can put his finger on the cause of Sheilah's unhappiness immediately. But whatever the cause, it's results we're after, isn't it? And if we remove Sheilah immediately from her present surroundings, nine chances out of ten we'll be lucky and eliminate the cause. It may be a boy, you know. She ——'

'Oh, no. It isn't a boy,' said Dora with finality. 'I'm a mother who keeps very close track of her daughter. She assures me it isn't a boy.'

'Well, naturally, if it *is* one ——'

'You're mistaken there, John. Sheilah has always told me everything. Anyway, she hasn't been seeing anything of any special boy lately. It's queer, but Sheilah doesn't seem to care about boys very much. Just at the age when most girls' interest in them increases, hers seems to have flattened out. For the last year, she won't make any effort at all — for a boy. It troubles me. I've spoken to her about it.'

'I wouldn't speak too often to her about too many things, Dora. Kittens grow best if not handled too much.'

2

But of course Mrs. Miller had to speak to Sheilah about Nevin Baldwin. She never knew a thing about his invitation until Mrs. Baldwin referred to it at a tea.

'We were so sorry Sheilah couldn't accept Nevin's invitation for his school-dance, last month,' she said.

Mrs. Miller murmured discreetly, 'Sheilah was very sorry, too,' but she could feel the color in her cheeks.

'I don't understand it in the least,' she told Sidney later as he was changing for dinner. 'Sheilah knows very well how much I approve of Nevin Baldwin. And yet she's never even mentioned the invitation. Why not? And why didn't she accept it? She likes Nevin. I know she likes him. And besides —— Nevin Baldwin! I shall speak to her about Nevin's invitation to-night.'

'Be gentle with her, Dora.'

'Am I ever anything else? I guess you can trust Sheilah to me, Sidney.'

3

Sheilah was late to dinner that evening. It was Saturday. She had been late to dinner last Saturday, too. She explained that she had been on a long walk hunting for pussy-willows. No, she hadn't found any. It was too early. Oh, about as far as the empty

ice-houses on Sabin Pond. Nobody went with her.

It was true. Felix had met her there. He had been waiting for her in the shadow of the ice-house. There had been no actual appointment, but the Saturday before, as they had crept out of the thick border of blackness on the land side of the ice-house, Felix had murmured, 'I'm coming next week, too.'

Sheilah had made no reply, but the thought of him waiting there for her in the dark had drawn her like a magnet all the week. She felt as helpless as a tiny steel needle now.

They had gone inside one of the empty ice-houses to-night, through a narrow slit where one of the old boards had been ripped off. How big it had seemed inside! And how terrifying! At first, more terrifying than Felix, so that she forgot him for a moment. But only for a moment. One could reason with the fear of the dark. But one couldn't with the fear of Felix. How thick the dark had seemed inside the ice-house! And heavy and stifling. How thick Felix had seemed, and heavy, and stifling, standing so close to her, but not touching her! Not at first.

4

'Sheilah, your soup, dear.'

She gave a little start.

'I can't, mother.'

'But it isn't right to leave good food like that.

There are starving people in the world who need it, Sheilah.'

'They can have it,' said Sheilah. She shoved the plate away from her a little. 'May I be excused? I'm not hungry to-night.' She stood up.

'Why, Sheilah, there are broiled sweetbreads coming. I ordered them especially for you. And pineapple salad. All your favorite things.'

'I can't eat to-night, mother. Don't urge me.'

'Why can't you eat?'

'Just the thought of food makes me feel sick.'

'But there's no reason it should. John Sheldon says you're perfectly well physically. You mustn't allow your imagination to get the upper hand of you like this. I think it wise for you to sit down, dear, and try to eat, anyway.'

'Must I?'

'Oh, let her go, Dora,' said Sidney.

Dora looked at Sidney — just looked at him, across the dish of artificial fruit. Sheilah could feel the look as it swept past her.

'Oh, I'll stay,' she said quickly. 'I don't mind.' And she sat down.

Dora waited until she could talk to Sheilah alone before approaching the subject of Nevin Baldwin. She waited until she heard Sheilah in her room above, shoving up her windows in preparation for the night, then laid aside her sewing and went upstairs.

'Ready for mother?' she inquired brightly from the threshold as she entered Sheilah's room.

Sheilah closed her teeth together tightly, and said nothing.

Mrs. Miller ignored the silence and approached the bed leaving the door into the hall open to light her way.

'Shall we have our prayers now, dear?' she inquired in the tone she always used when referring to anything religious. Mrs. Miller had clung to the childhood custom of hearing Sheilah say her prayers occasionally, just as some mothers cling too long to symbols of dependent babyhood with their last-born.

Sheilah murmured, 'Not to-night. And please don't ask me again.'

'Why, Sheilah, dear! How wrought up my little daughter is!' And she sat down on the edge of Sheilah's bed. Mrs. Miller was not a slender woman. The bed creaked.

Sheilah said, 'Please sit in a chair.'

'Why, Sheilah!' again exclaimed her mother, and began stroking Sheilah's forehead.

Her hands smelled faintly of dried sweet-grass. They always smelled that like. A sickish smell, Sheilah thought. She closed her eyes, and lay straight and rigid beneath the bedclothes, bound tightly across her by her mother's body, wait-

ing — waiting — waiting —— It couldn't last forever.

'Sheilah, dear,' said Mrs. Miller finally, still continuing to stroke. 'Tell mother something. Why didn't you go to Nevin Baldwin's school-dance? I've just heard about it.'

'I didn't want to.'

'Didn't want to! But, my dear! Nevin Baldwin!'

'Oh, mother, leave me, please.'

'And why didn't you tell mother about it?' Mrs. Miller purringly pursued, unaware that the long-withheld flood was driving hard at weakening gates. 'I can't understand it, sweetheart.' Oh, she was ever so gentle. 'Mother can't understand what has come over her daughter. You don't seem to wish to please me any more, to do the things that would please me. And we're so sympathetic. You know what I think of Nevin Baldwin. You know ——'

'Mother.' Sheilah suddenly sat up in bed. 'Will you go? Will you go?' Twice, quietly.

Mrs. Miller was unaware of any crisis. She started to put her arms around Sheilah, protectingly, shelteringly. And suddenly the gates broke!

Sheilah pushed her away. 'Don't touch me! Don't come near me!' she cried out. 'I can't *bear* to have you touch me! Go away! Get off my bed, and go away.'

Mrs. Miller stood up staring at Sheilah. Sheilah

caught the pained, distorted look on her face in the dim light, but it was too late now to stop the waters. She went on mercilessly. 'I mean it. I can't bear it any longer. There's *no* sympathy between us. None! None! Oh, go away, go away!'

She flung herself forward on the bed and broke into uncontrolled sobbing. She had done a terrible thing, she supposed, but she was glad. She had let the pressing flood through at last, and it was good to feel it flowing over her, possessing her, sweeping her along with a strength stronger than hers — drenching her, drowning her. It was good to drown in strong, deep waters.

5

If only one did drown! Oh, but one didn't! One didn't drown in the flood of one's own emotions after all! Sheilah discovered that night that a catastrophe of one's own making can hurt more than the ache of holding it back.

She didn't know whether it was five minutes or five hours later that she rose to the surface of the swirling waters, and heard, coming from afar off, the queer, measured, mechanical sound that proved to be her own voice. She lay very still at first, and tried to stop it. But she couldn't. That was horrible to her. Where was she? What had happened? There was her dressing-table, between the two ruffle-curtained

windows, her desk, her low rocking-chair beside it. She was awake. Fully awake. She was sitting up now. She was standing. She could feel the cold floor beneath her bare feet. And there was her father coming towards her from the hall.

'Father!' she managed to call out. She could speak, anyhow. And hear too.

He said, 'It's all right, Sheilah. Get back into bed.'

And suddenly she remembered everything!

'I sent mother away,' she said between the queer dry sobs that continued to have their own way with her. 'I didn't want her to touch me. I didn't want anybody to touch me.'

'Don't be afraid. Nobody shall,' her father assured her. 'Just get back into bed.'

'Oh, I don't mean *you*!' she cried out. 'Oh, father!' And she stretched out her bare arms towards him.

Sidney Miller wasn't a very big man. Sheilah was nearly as tall as he now. But he lifted her quite easily. He was, in fact, unaware of any weight at all as he slipped his arms beneath her wraith-like body, and carried her across the room to the low rocking-chair by the desk. She clung like a scarf beaten against him by the wind as he sat down with her.

'Don't leave me,' she begged.

'I won't,' he replied.

Later she murmured, relaxing her tight hold upon him a little, 'I'm so tired.' And still later, when the intervals between the sobs had widened to long pauses, 'I thought I was drowning.' And just before she fell asleep, with a deep soft sigh, 'You're like a great big ship underneath me, father.'

CHAPTER IX

I

SIDNEY MILLER had never held any sleeping human being before in his life. Not even Sheilah when she was a baby. It hadn't been allowed. Dora said it wasn't good for babies to be held. Nobody had ever clung to Sidney Miller and become limp and relaxed like this in his arms. It gave him a sort of choked feeling. Of course he had always been fond of Sheilah. Naturally. His own child. And suffered tortures if ever she was sick or in danger, and felt fearfully sorry for the poor kid when Dora had insisted upon some of her theories, but he had never known Sheilah intimately. A daughter belonged first to her mother, Dora said. Besides, Dora understood girls so much better. He had never caressed Sheilah nor she him, except in fun — in a spirit of laughter and play. And now suddenly, when she was broken and bruised, she turned to him — she clung to him, and went to sleep in his arms! Good Lord! But it gripped him! It must be weak and sentimental to feel like this about one's own child. He was ashamed of the aching tenderness that stirred him whenever he glanced down at Sheilah. But ashamed though he was, he hoped Dora wouldn't come and interrupt the new sensations. He had given Dora two

sleeping-tablets an hour ago. She had consented to lie down. He hoped that she had fallen asleep.

How big Sheilah was! Why, a woman now almost. He hadn't realized it. Curves he hadn't been aware of had formed, it seemed, overnight. Only yesterday she had been a little girl. But *now* — was this great, long, lovely creature his daughter — his own daughter indeed? How heavy she was — how satisfyingly heavy. He had become aware now of her weight. But he liked it. He liked his arm aching a little where her body pressed it against the chair-arm. He drew the comforter, which he had dragged off the bed when he first carried her to the chair, closer about her. Funny how just trying to protect her from the cold woke up long-sleeping emotions in him!

It was when the hall-clock struck two that Sheilah stirred and began moaning. She must be dreaming, Sidney thought, and he spoke her name gently. She opened her eyes, struggled to a sitting position, and spoke. But she didn't wake up.

'They won't come off,' she said, in a voice full of despair. 'Oh! Oh! — They won't come off.' And she began rubbing one of her wrists in a strange, sort of Lady Macbeth fashion, as if there was something on it. Suddenly her body became taut and rigid, and she cried out, 'There's one *here!*' And she began rubbing her lips!

Sidney shook her. 'Wake up, Sheilah,' he commanded.

She responded almost immediately, looked at him, raised her hand, and touched his cheek to see if he were real, sighed, 'Father,' and then sank back into his arms, her body melting against him again.

'Did you have a bad dream?'

'Yes.' She spoke with difficulty as if she had been running hard. 'I often have it. It was worse this time.'

'Well, dreams can't hurt you.'

'No, but they can frighten you dreadfully!'

'But it's good to wake up.'

'For a minute it's good. Till the real things begin frightening you. Where's mother?'

'In her room.'

'I've done a dreadful thing to her.'

'No, you haven't. I think she's asleep. She'll be all right in the morning.'

There was a long pause.

'Father ——'

'Yes.'

'Father ——' It was very still in the room. The glimmer of light from the hall made a soft brown mist over everything. The stillness and the brown mist covered you, shielded you, and the touch of a rough sleeve smelling of tobacco, against your cheek, gave you a feeling of strength and courage. 'Father,'

Sheilah said quietly, 'Would you feel badly to have me marry the son of a plumber?'

'A plumber?'

'Yes. Felix Nawn. His father is a plumber. The Nawns, you know. They go to our church. Aren't some plumbers nice?'

'Felix Nawn? The Nawns?' Sidney Miller groped. The vague outline of a slow-moving, slope-shouldered figure passing the contribution box in the east gallery, on Sunday, crossed his vision. 'Nawn? A plumber? Is he a plumber? I didn't know it. Of course some plumbers are nice. But what have you got to do with his son, Sheilah?'

'I've got to marry him. I've got to marry Felix Nawn, father.'

A sudden fear — a grotesque, nightmarish thing clutched hold of Sidney Miller. He shook it off. Why, she was only a child!

'Come, Sheilah. I guess that dream is still bothering you, isn't it?'

'No, my dream has nothing to do with Felix. It's not even about Felix. No, father, I know what I'm saying. I've got to marry him. I've tried not to, but there seemed to be powers working against me all the time, and now I can't get away from it. I've just got to marry him, father,' she reiterated. 'It will almost kill mother. Mother wanted something so different for me. That's why I've kept it secret from

her. But I can't keep it secret any longer. Don't you understand?'

'But, Sheilah ——'

'You'll help me, won't you?'

'Of course.'

'And tell mother?'

'Why, of course, but ——'

'I knew you would. I'm so glad there's you. I think I can go to sleep now, if you wouldn't mind too awfully sitting by my bed awhile. Don't leave me alone. Oh, father, I'm so glad I've told you about Felix.'

2

Was five o'clock in the morning too early to call up John Sheldon? Was five-fifteen? Was five-twenty? How the minutes crawled! Sitting there beside Sheilah in the gray dawn, filtering through the ruffled windows like white fog, the fear in Sidney Miller's heart grew less phantasmical, more clearly defined, along with the outlines of the furniture in the room, as the light increased.

Hadn't he just been thinking, as he had held Sheilah in his arms an hour ago, how grown-up she was? Almost a woman? It was possible, then, wasn't it? Mistakes — young, impulsive, innocent mistakes, trailing their horrible results after them, were made sometimes. But it couldn't happen to

him — to *his* child, could it? It couldn't happen to Sheilah! Of course not! There would be something fine in Sheilah that would protect and shield her always. Even if she was ignorant. But Dora had often boasted to him that she wasn't ignorant. Oh, perhaps it was a mistake telling girls so much so soon. Perhaps it made them dwell on such things, and broke down their instinctive fineness. Five-thirty. Only five-thirty? Good Lord!

What exactly had Sheilah said, anyway? For the dozenth time he reviewed her few broken, despairing sentences before she fell asleep. 'I've got to marry him. Don't you understand? I've fought against it, but now I can't get away from it. I've tried to keep it secret, but I can't any longer.' Substantiating. Horribly substantiating. And so was her physical condition — her inertia, her lack of appetite, her despondency. It had baffled them all. Even John Sheldon had had no satisfactory explanation to offer. Sidney got out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. He couldn't endure this much longer.

He got up and stole out of the room when the hall-clock struck six. He didn't care how early it was. He simply must talk to John Sheldon. John would put an end to this torturing uncertainty. It was unreasonable, he supposed, to rout a man out of bed at such an hour, just because you were racked by a fear that might prove groundless. Oh, if it only *did*

prove groundless! Why, he'd give John Sheldon half his fortune to have him come over *now, immediately*, and tell him he'd been all kinds of a fool. John Sheldon had had many similar half-fortunes left him.

Sidney tiptoed noiselessly past Dora's door (thank heaven, she was still sleeping! Dora mustn't suspect), and stole down the stairs to the telephone.

3

John Sheldon had been asleep just one hour when the telephone-bell, muffled out of regard for Charlotte, burred softly on the base-board by his head. He had been out till twelve helping an old man reluctantly leave the world; and till nearly five helping a baby reluctantly enter it. Charlotte heard the burr. It always woke her up, though John wasn't aware of it.

'Hello,' she heard him saying. 'Why, hello, Sid,' so pleasantly — so almost enthusiastically, as if it was a perfectly Christian hour, and he was about to receive a delightful invitation of some sort. 'Why, of course not,' he went on in the same tone. 'Not a bit too early, Sid. Almost time to get up, anyway. Go ahead.' Silence then as he listened, and afterwards, 'I'll come right over. I'll be there in ten minutes.'

Charlotte inquired, though she very well knew, 'Who's calling at such an hour?'

John replied, swinging out of bed for the third time that night, 'Sidney Miller. Sheilah hasn't had a very good night.'

'Does she actually need you, do you think?'

'Oh, I guess not. She's asleep now.'

'Honestly, John, you do let people impose on you so.'

'Well, Sid sounded as if he sort of needed somebody,' John apologized.

'Sort of needed somebody! Really! Why, it's unbecoming to your position, John, running out like this at such an hour, when it isn't *necessary*.'

'Sorry. It's been a mean night for you, Charlotte. I'll pull the shades down, so you can sleep late.'

4

Sidney was watching for John. He was at the front door when John's old gray Cadillac coughed into the drive. He let him in silently, led the way into the living-room, and closed the door behind him. Then burst out:

'Something's happened. Sheilah has told me something. It explains everything. I'm afraid something dreadful has happened to Sheilah.' And he poured forth his fears, accumulated through the long watching hours by Sheilah's side, without re-

serve, without apology, as a frightened child to a brother much older. Yet John was several years his junior.

Afterwards John said quietly, seriously, just as if anxiety deserved as much consideration as suffering from an actual calamity, 'Well, Sid, I'll go upstairs and see. You'd better go out and take a walk for half an hour, and I'll be able to tell you definitely, I think, when you get back. And, look here, don't worry too much, Sid. I really don't think there's a chance in a hundred.'

He was like a rock. John Sheldon was like a rock. Even if the terrible thing proved true, still he would be like a rock.

Of course Sidney didn't go outdoors. 'Be as quick as you can,' he said at Sheilah's door, and went downstairs again into the living-room.

The window-shades were still drawn down. He hadn't noticed it till now. No maids stirring yet, of course. He wasn't used to seeing the window-shades drawn down in the living-room when it was light outside. It was as if some one had died. The evening paper was all tossed about on the floor, too, in dreadful confusion, just as he had left it, he supposed, when he had rushed upstairs last night (was it only last night?) when Dora had called him, frightened, from the upper hall, and he had heard Sheilah crying out in that horrible way. He began raising the

window-shades now and folding up the paper — it was better to do something — and then fell to walking up and down the room. He had walked up and down this room before when John Sheldon had been upstairs, but the fear of death had not been as terrible as this.

It seemed as if John never would come. Perhaps he'd better try reading. A magazine. Or the paper. An editorial, perhaps. He sat down. Where was the editorial page, anyway? Never mind! He got up and began walking up and down the room again. Awful — this waiting. Worse than when Sheilah was born. That same bitter taste in the back of his mouth again. That same sensation of dropping through space, when some unexpected noise, like the clock striking, or the milkman's truck outside, startled him. That same horrible pressure afterwards on his chest, as if he'd fallen finally, and the blow had turned his breath into something thick, which could be drawn only with difficulty through tubes too small. What in heaven's name took John so long, anyhow? He had said a half an hour. Already thirty-five minutes had crawled by. This delay was not a favorable omen. Oh, poor Sheilah! Poor Sheilah! What was he to do with her? Where was he to take her? And Dora! Who was to tell Dora? John would have to tell Dora. John would have to put that knife in.

Suddenly Sidney heard John's step on the stairs. He stood still just where he was in the middle of the room, staring at the door through which John would enter. John was smiling! Well, he might be smiling just to be kind, even if —

John came up to him close.

'It's all right, Sid,' he said quietly.

'What did you say?'

'I said it's all right. Sheilah is all right. Your fears are groundless.'

Sidney looked at John searchingly. 'How do you know it's all right, John?'

John replied, smiling, 'Because it's my business to know, Sid.'

'And you *do* know?'

'I know.'

Sidney accepted it at last. He sank down in a chair near by. 'Thanks,' he said weakly, 'thanks.' He groped for John Sheldon's hand, got hold of it, squeezed it. 'Thanks, John.'

'Nonsense, Sid,' said John, and got his hand away.

'I guess I've been rather of a fool,' murmured Sidney.

'Well, rather,' agreed John Sheldon. 'Haven't had your clothes off, have you, Sid?'

Sidney shook his head. Good heavens, he hoped he wasn't going to break down. John probably saw

what a state he was in, for he offered him a cigarette from his own pocket. 'Have one?' and held the match for him.

Afterwards, when they were both barriered behind a wall of smoke, John Sheldon went into detail about Sheilah, not looking at Sidney much, gazing out of the window most of the time. Sheilah hadn't been surprised to find him beside her, he said, when she woke up. One is never surprised to find one's doctor beside one, when one wakes up after an accident, or a night like Sheilah's. He and Sheilah had had a splendid talk. Of course it had taken a little time and tact to get her to talk. He was sorry to have kept Sidney waiting so long, but to gain Sheilah's confidence was the battle half-won.

'We've made a great headway to-night towards getting Sheilah out of the woods,' he said finally. 'I am glad this break came. Otherwise she might have gone on bottling up this sense of moral obligation to this boy for months. That's all it is, Sid. And an overdeveloped conscience. Conflicting ideals. They work terrible havoc with certain people. Well, we know what we've got to fight now. We must get her right away from here.'

'Yes. We must get her right away from here,' eagerly Sidney agreed, his relief doing queer things to his voice. Oh, he wished he could tell John how grateful he felt.

John stood up. 'Well, I'll run along back now and get some breakfast, I guess.'

Sidney followed John out to his car, close like a dog.

'Good-bye,' he said, and took one of John Sheldon's hands in both his. He wrung it hard. 'And thanks. I'll never forget it. Thanks, old man.' And he grasped hold of his arm.

'Say, Sid, you act drunk,' laughed John Sheldon, and shook him off. 'You go on in and get some sleep.'

Sidney Miller watched the old gray Cadillac out of sight. He wasn't a religious man, nor a sentimental one usually, but say, God bless men like John Sheldon. God bless men who can drop in in the morning before breakfast, and turn hell into heaven for you, with a simple 'I know.'

6

'Well,' asked Charlotte, ten minutes later, as John appeared on the threshold, 'was it necessary?'

John Sheldon shrugged.

'Oh, I don't suppose so,' he said.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

I

FELIX NAWN roomed alone on Greene Street on the top floor of a three-family house over a mile away from the campus. He was the only college boy in the house. He was the only college boy on the street. Greene Street was on the other side of the railroad track from the college buildings, and the fraternity houses, and the various restaurants and lunch-rooms planted here and there for the boys.

The railroad track was like a wall. The college boys seldom crossed it. It was because Felix had as usual been wandering alone, away from the herd, that he chanced to pass through Greene Street and see the placard in the window announcing that there was a room to let. He had had no idea where to hunt for a room, only a dull, steady desire, like a dull, steady ache, to get away from the enthusiasm and boisterous greetings which he had been witnessing for three days at every corner around the campus, as old friend met old friend, or group fell into step with group, or reunited club members sprawled in luxurious comradeship over the steps and broad verandas of the fraternity houses.

The room on Greene Street looked away from the

spires of the college chapel. There was a view of nothing but a steeply rising hill with a fringe of dark woods at the top from its windows. He could study here, undisturbed by college cheers and songs, and halloos of passing friends, with no friend to call and halloo to *him*. He had got to study, too. Besides, there was something about Mrs. Sparks, the landlady, that gave him a comfortable feeling — the first comfortable feeling he had had since he had reached this confusing mass called college, into which he felt sure he could never mix. Mrs. Sparks wore a big, full, white apron tied around her waist, and her steel-bowed spectacles were rusty.

Felix told her he would take the room and move in the next day. He hadn't much to move, he said — some books, two tables, a chair. They were now at the freight office. And a box of tools. Did she object to the tools? Carpenter's tools. One of the tables was a carpenter's bench. He didn't know that he'd have much time at college to work at it, but he liked making things out of wood. Little things. Inlaid boxes, book-ends, frames, dolls' chairs and bureaus. He wouldn't make much noise. And he always brushed up after himself.

Mrs. Sparks said she wouldn't mind brushing up a little sawdust along with his cigarette ashes, she guessed. But Felix said there wouldn't be any cigarette ashes. He didn't smoke.

Four years ago Felix had promised Sheilah he wouldn't smoke. Four years ago, in the Wallbridge high-school, promising a girl you wouldn't smoke for her sake sealed a secret compact between you, when you were both too young and timid to talk of love. Four years ago Sheilah had accepted the position of Felix's good angel. Girls were good angels to boys when Sheilah was in her early teens. To Felix she was still his good angel.

He hadn't seen Sheilah for over two years when he engaged the room on Greene Street, but there hadn't been a day that he hadn't thought of her. Everything he did, like coming to college, everything he didn't do, like not smoking, was for Sheilah. Still for Sheilah! Even though she had hurt him so, too. Even though his common sense told him that he had faded to nothing but a memory to her. Oh, but once she had cared! Once he could keep her by him by just laying his fingers on her wrist. And once — the last time he had seen her — it had not been by her wrist that he had kept her by him, so still and quiet there in the inky blackness of the ice-house.

It hadn't been a kiss, exactly. Less definite than a kiss. No real beginning. No real ending. She had pushed against him a little at first. He liked to recall the feeling of Sheilah pushing against him a little. And then had become willing. Afterwards she had whispered, close, 'We mustn't. Oh, we mustn't.'

And he had made her struggle against him again.
And become quiet and willing again.

When Felix got to thinking about the last time he saw Sheilah, he would shove his books away from him and close his eyes, and the sea of his consciousness would rise and fall and billow around him with surging thought-waves of Sheilah. Like great combers. One after another. Mounting high and higher. Threatening to drown him. Would have drowned him, perhaps, but for the carpenter's bench.

Often, when Felix got to thinking too much about Sheilah, he would sit down at his carpenter's bench, and with saw, and chisel, and plane, fashion little things with his hands. And the waves would subside, and Sheilah would withdraw again into the mist.

2

During the second winter, however, that Felix occupied the room on Greene Street, Sheilah didn't withdraw into the mist when he worked at his carpenter's bench. She couldn't while her very name — her very lovely name — was growing beneath his fingers in white ivory bordered with ebony, planted in satinwood.

He wished he had known early in the fall that Sheilah was coming to the Prom in February, then he could have started his task sooner, and his studying need not have suffered so. The menacing mid-

year examinations were only three weeks away when it first occurred to Felix to make something at the bench for Sheilah. It was just after the Christmas holidays that Nevin Baldwin told him that Sheilah was coming to the Prom.

Felix and Nevin had little in common. Nevin, of course, was a fraternity man. Felix, of course, was not. They seldom saw each other. At least Nevin seldom saw Felix. Felix had more opportunity. He could see Nevin every time he went to a football game, and hear his name shouted, too. Felix never shouted his name, however. Felix seldom joined in the college cheering, he was so aware of his own voice. Nevin and Felix might have met in the recitation room had they been members of the same class, but Nevin was a year ahead of Felix. They might have met in the gymnasium, or on the running-track, or at the training-table, had Felix 'gone out' for anything athletic. But he hadn't. He hadn't gone out for anything. He hadn't known how. Nevin, of course, had gone out for everything when he was a freshman. Nevin had known how.

Nevin had entered college from a prominent boarding-school, with a group of boys who were the sons of prominent men. Felix had entered college from an undistinguished high-school, alone, and was the son of anything but a prominent man. He had been painfully aware of the difference the first time he saw

Nevin Baldwin, and two others of his kind, swinging across the campus. He had been painfully aware of the difference every time he saw him later. However Nevin Baldwin was the only person he knew in the whole college. If he made himself known to Nevin, perhaps he would give him a little advice, tell him what he should do to get into the college life, slipping by him — always slipping by him, like a moving sidewalk, while he stood stationary and watched. Timidity, and a pressing desire to become a good-fellow, like Nevin, fought for weeks in Felix's heart before he dared to approach Nevin. Nevin, always bent upon some urgent business, simply hadn't seen Felix.

'Why, hello there! If it isn't old Pастey,' he had exclaimed to Felix's shy 'Do you remember me?' 'Glad to see you, Pастey. How are things going?' He had been in a great hurry. 'Five minutes late already, old man. Sorry. See you later.' And later, it had always only been, 'Hello, there, Pастey. How are you?' Though once he *had* added, 'Drop in at my diggin's sometime.'

But of course Felix never had dropped in at the big, mansion-like fraternity house that was Nevin's 'diggin's.'

Felix had never dropped in anywhere. People thought he didn't want to, perhaps, if they thought at all. But he did. He *did* want to! Sheilah would like a fellow who had places to drop in.

3

It was one late afternoon in January, walking away from the library, that Nevin told Felix about Sheilah. They had met on the library steps. Felix had been spending three long terrific hours in the library, trying to dig the important facts out of fifty pages of prescribed history, and then attempting to transport them across the great, wide, all but un-navigable space that yawned between the white pages of the book and his brain. And, once transported, to keep them there, in some sort of order and state of preservation until they were needed for consumption in class the next day, or the next week. One never could tell when. Nevin had been spending less than one hour transporting, from twice the number of pages to *his* brain, similar facts which, when once they were landed, seemed mechanically to slip into their proper cells and places.

It was raining when Nevin came running down the library steps behind Felix. Felix carried an umbrella. He always carried an umbrella when it rained. Nevin never carried an umbrella.

'Hello, Pastey. Going in my direction?'

Felix decided that he was.

'Yes. Come on under,' eagerly he replied.

Nevin slipped his arm through Felix's familiarly, just as if he were a fellow club member, though

Felix, and hugged up to him close, as they splashed through the slush of the melting snow.

'You don't live in Wallbridge any more, do you?' Nevin inquired.

'No. My folks moved away three years ago,' Felix told him.

'Thought so. Never see you.' Then, abruptly, 'Remember Sheilah Miller?'

'Yes. I remember her.'

'She remembers you too. Asked me how you were last time I was home.'

'Did she?'

'She's coming on for the Prom next month.'

'With you?'

'Well, chiefly. Three of us invited her, and she's cutting herself up in thirds, she says, and leaving the distribution to me.'

'Oh,' said Felix. Then, 'How is she?'

'Oh, great! She's doing the coming-out stunt, this year, you know.'

Felix did know, but he murmured, 'Is she?'

'Where you rooming, Pastey?' abruptly Nevin inquired.

'On Greene Street.'

'Greene Street? Where's Greene Street?'

'Across the railroad track.'

'Where's that?'

'You wouldn't know, I guess,' smiled Felix.

And suddenly he didn't care whether Nevin Baldwin knew or not, whether anybody knew. Sheilah had spoken his name! She had asked how he was. It was as if she had sent him a message. And she was coming! Here! Soon! Somehow, somewhere, he would see her! And the last time he had seen her he had kissed her! There had been no meeting since to dull that last time of its sharpness and its edge. No letter. No word of any kind. He was glad now. It was as if the last time he had seen Sheilah had been at the top of a height they had reached together. There had been no slow descent. The dark that had wrapped them round, as they had stood there together, had suddenly swallowed Sheilah up and she had disappeared. But he had not stirred. All these months and months he had not stirred! Sheilah would find him waiting just where she had left him on the same high peak.

4

Once inside his room that night, Felix took off his overcoat and overshoes and put them carefully away in the closet. Then sat down at his study-table, opened its single drawer, and took out from the back corner a long white envelope, and emptied its contents into the bright circle of light before him.

It contained all the clippings which referred to Sheilah and her coming-out, which he had cut from

the Wallbridge paper he subscribed to; a picture of Sheilah from the Sunday edition of a Boston paper; the notes she had written him in the high school — five in all; and a copy of the only letter he had ever written her. There had been no answer to that only letter. He wished now he had never written it. But the uncertainty that had stretched on and on after Sheilah had disappeared from the height beside him had been so awful.

Felix glanced away from the little collection in the bright circle before him, and gazed into a dark corner of the room, as his thoughts turned back to the long dark silence that had followed that night with Sheilah in the ice-house. She hadn't come to church the next day, nor to school on Monday. Somebody had said that she was sick. Night after night he had walked by her house during that first two weeks of wondering. Then one day at school he overheard somebody say that Sheilah Miller had gone away to boarding-school. Still Felix walked by Sheilah's house, even after it was barred and shuttered for the summer. The Millers took Sheilah to Europe on the first of June. They took her directly from her boarding-school to the dock in New York.

It was Felix's mother who told him that the Millers had gone to Europe for the summer. She had heard about it at church. No. It hadn't been mentioned when they were coming back. All during July

and August Felix had walked by the Millers' closed house that summer, waiting for it to stir and come alive again.

But he never saw it stir and come alive. Felix's father moved his family away from Wallbridge in early September, when the Miller house was still asleep. He moved them to a little town in Vermont where a friend of his, who was a builder and in search of a partner, was running a lively business near a big new industrial plant, necessitating the putting up of a lot of new houses.

Felix's only letter to Sheilah had been written from the little town in Vermont. It hadn't said what he wanted it to. His thoughts about Sheilah were like wild birds soaring high above him, and wouldn't let themselves get caught by words. He opened his copy of the letter now, and read it through.

DEAR SHEILAH,

We've moved away from Wallbridge. My father has gone into a new business. My new address is Terry, Vermont. I feel just the same, Sheilah, I always will, about you. Even if you did go away without a word. Won't you write to me once in a while? I go to a high-school, ten miles from here, because you said once you hoped I'd go to college, and I'm trying to. It would help me if I could have a letter from you.

Hoping you are well, and that you will write me soon.

Your sincere friend

FELIX NAWN

No sound of the wild birds here. Tame, commonplace, clumsy. Felix was aware of it. He ought never to have tried to write a letter to Sheilah. No wonder she had never answered it.

No wonder. She had never received it.

Mrs. Miller's conscience hadn't pricked her in the least when, after a careful perusal of Felix's letter, she had decided not to forward it to Sheilah, already returned to boarding-school for a second year. The result would have been the same. Sheilah would not have written to the boy. At least John Sheldon had persuaded her last spring when she first went away not to write to him. Mrs. Miller felt quite certain that the absurd little-girl interest that she had felt for this queer boy was all over now. Still there was nothing to be gained by reminding her of him. Mrs. Miller burned Felix's letter, and never referred to it. It might easily have been lost in the mail.

CHAPTER II

I

HUNT LEBARON and Bertie Percival both insisted that no such street as Greene existed. But Nevin at the wheel of the big yellow roadster said he thought he'd heard of a Greene Street. Finally a policeman directed them across the railroad track.

Sheilah was sitting in the middle of the back seat, between Hunt LeBaron and Peggy McLaughlin. Both Peggy and Sheilah had proved very popular at the fraternity house. And at the Prom, too. Opposite types. Peggy — noisy, bold, hoidenish, a scintillating little brunette, dressed in bright scarlet on the night of the Prom, with a quick, infectious laugh, and a quick, infectious response to every squeeze of the hand or more you gave her. Sheilah — still, silvery, mysterious — dressed in white over something shining, with a soft, phosphorescent quality about her, and an indefinite something that made Nevin want to press her hand more than he ever wanted to press Peggy's. But didn't dare.

They were both Nevin's guests. Nevin had invited Peggy for his room-mate, Hunt LeBaron. He had invited Sheilah for himself. On this last afternoon he had wanted to run away alone with

Sheilah in the car somewhere, and escape the private spreads and tea-dances. But she had insisted on looking up this Nawn fellow. Said she thought she ought to.

Of course she ought to. Felix's note had been waiting for her on the mail-table at the fraternity house when she arrived. He had delivered it himself apparently. There was no stamp.

DEAR SHEILAH,

Could you come and see me Friday afternoon about four? I will wait for you. I would like to show you my room. I live at 17 Greene Street.

Sincerely

FELIX NAWN

Sheilah had supposed she would run across Felix before Friday, but she had seen him nowhere. She had asked two members of his own class at the fraternity house if they knew Felix Nawn. One of them had replied, 'Only by name,' and she thought she detected a smile pass between them. The more Felix's obscurity at college became apparent to Sheilah, the more determined she was to look him up.

'You see,' she had explained to the frowning Nevin, just before lunch on the last day, 'he wrote and asked me.'

'And you always do everything every one asks you?'

'Well, I used to know him in the high-school.'

'Oh, if you have such an experience in common as all that!'

'Don't be absurd, Nevin. He's an old friend.'

'Well, when *am* I going to see you?' Nevin demanded. 'Alone, I mean. I had it all planned to run out in the country in the car this afternoon. Just you and I.'

'Can't we cut the Glee Club Concert, and go to-night for a little while?'

'*Will* you?' eagerly Nevin demanded.

'If you'll be nice and take me to see Felix this afternoon.'

'All right. It's a bargain. Shake.'

He clasped Sheilah's hand hard in his and looked straight into her blue eyes. She looked back straight into his blue eyes. It was as if blue steel struck blue steel and there was a sudden spark.

2

It was after five o'clock when Nevin's car crawled up Greene Street on second, and stopped at number seventeen.

'This can't be it!' exclaimed Bertie, staring incredulously at the battle-ship gray three-decker, with the long flight of wooden steps leading up to the front door with the tier of bells and tubes beside it.

'Doesn't look as if he'd invited much of a crowd,' commented Hunt.

'I hope you're going to be properly chaperoned,' remarked Peggy.

'What sort of a guy is this, anyhow?' inquired the still-staring Bertie.

'I'll hop out and see if we're barking up the wrong tree,' said Hunt.

'No, *I* will.' Sheilah insisted with the old queer feeling of protection for Felix. She wished she could have managed to come alone.

'It's all right,' she called back from the piazza. Felix's name was written in pencil, beneath Mrs. Sparks's on a card over one of the bells. 'Come back for me in half an hour.'

She pressed the bell. There was a clicking sound at her side. She pushed open the door and stepped into a dim, carpeted hall.

'Come right up,' a voice said from above.

She mounted the stairs. Two flights.

'That's his room.' The voice belonged to a little old lady in glasses at the top of the stairs. 'He's been expecting you since before four. I'll knock.'

3

Felix was standing by his desk. It was dim in the room, although there were the remains of a yellow sunset stealing into it from across white fields outside. The little old lady had closed the door behind her.

Sheilah said brightly, 'Hello, Felix.'

Felix murmured, 'I'd about given you up.'

He was leaning against his desk for support, staring at Sheilah with the sunset shining on her. She had on a little round black velvet hat that totally eclipsed her crown of shining hair except for a fluff of gold that escaped from beneath the close brim, like a corona. Her eyes were like two stars shining in the twilight of the room.

This wasn't the first time Felix had seen Sheilah since she had arrived in the college town. He had been lurking behind a pile of trunks at the station when she first stepped off the train. On the night of the Prom itself he had watched her for an hour through one of the windows. Her matured loveliness had frightened him at first. Her radiance and self-confidence and popularity had made her seem remote and inaccessible. He had wished, for a miserable hour or so after the Prom, that he had never asked this stranger to come and see his room. But now, when she stood before him alone, and he heard her voice, he discovered she hadn't really changed at all. She came up to him, laughing a little nervously, for he stared so.

'Well, aren't you going to say you're glad to see me?'

'I guess I don't need to.'

'And aren't you going to ask me to sit down?'

You've got me on your hands for the next half-hour.'

'Won't you sit down?'

'No, thanks, I won't just yet. I want to look around first. What a nice room you have, Felix.' And very slowly she pirouetted on the spot where she stood. 'And oh, what a lovely view!' She walked over to the window. 'I can imagine rooming here just for the sake of this view. Those hills and the fir trees at the top!'

She contemplated them in silence for the next half-minute, her back towards Felix. He walked up behind her, and raised the shade above her head.

'You can see the mountains in the next State on a clear day,' he remarked.

'Really? Can you?' She grasped gratefully at this contribution. 'What mountains are they?'

Felix replied, 'I didn't think you'd come.'

She laughed lightly, and turned and faced him. 'Why wouldn't I?'

'I was afraid you wouldn't, after ——' he lowered his voice, he lowered his eyes too, 'after last time.'

'Oh, but that was years ago. I've forgotten all about that. Do you like college, Felix?'

'I haven't forgotten about it.'

'But we were just children. Tell me about what you're taking. I'd love to hear about your courses.'

And half-leaning, half-sitting on the low window-sill, she looked up at him with a smile she tried to make frank and open and friendly.

Felix turned away.

'I shan't be taking anything any more. I've flunked.'

'Oh, have you?' Immediately her manner changed. There was no lightness in her tone now.

'In your midyears? Oh, I'm awfully sorry.'

'Oh, I'm no good, I guess.'

'Of course you are! Of course you're some good!'

It was the way she had always talked to him. The creases of the old cloak fell about her as naturally as if it had not been folded and put away.

'No. I'm no good. I ought to have known I couldn't have gotten through college.'

'But you got in! You got through your freshman year! That's a lot. That's splendid.'

'Yes, but I wanted to graduate. I thought you wouldn't look at me unless —— It was for you. But it's all over now. I've got to go home next week. I didn't cram hard enough. I have to study about four times as much as any other boy. But, perhaps, after all, it's just as well, if all that's happened between us doesn't mean anything to you. I don't care what I amount to if you don't care.'

'Oh, don't say that. Please.' Suddenly she felt the burden of him on her again. 'I do care, Felix.'

I mean,' she added, struggling against it, trying to push it away, 'I mean I ——'

'You went away without a word.'

'I know. The doctor thought it was better.'

'And you never answered my letter.'

'I never knew you wrote me a letter.'

'I did. In the fall.'

The color mounted to Sheilah's cheeks.

'They didn't show it to me. That wasn't fair. I was fair with them. What did you say in your letter?'

'Not much. Only that I wished you'd write once in a while, and that I felt just the same. About you, I mean. And I guess I always will.' His sentence came brokenly with pauses between, like confessions spoken unwillingly. 'I can't help it. I see you all the time. Like the last time. In the ice-house. At night I see you. After the lights are out. When it's dark. Every night. I haven't skipped a night.'

'Oh, you mustn't! You mustn't!'

Her light banter had disappeared entirely now. Her brave defense of simple comradeship had been swept away. How was it, that crude and uncouth as Felix was, lacking in all the qualities she admired most, he possessed the power to do this thing to her — to wipe out intervening years and sweep her back to a time and place long left behind? 'You mustn't, you mustn't,' had been the identical words she had

said to him the last time she had seen him in the ice-house. In a twinkling she had become the identical girl again, struggling, resisting, fighting something she didn't want.

4

But she would not be conquered this time against her wish, against her will.

'It's getting dark. Let's have a light,' she said, in a bright, practical voice, and she drew her foot away from Felix's, which he had stealthily shoved against hers when last she spoke. It was as if she had repulsed a dog who had come back faithful to her after many years. He seemed to cower.

'All right,' he acquiesced. 'I guess I understand.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry, Felix.'

How was it he contrived always to make her feel sorry?

'Oh, I'm not good enough.'

'Yes, you are!'

'I'll never amount to anything.'

'Yes, you will!'

'Not if you don't care, I won't. Everything I do is for you, Sheilah,' he added in a dull voice, as if stating a very old and familiar fact.

'After all these years?' she queried gently.

He nodded and stood very still before her, aware

of the sudden gentleness, and moved his foot against hers again.

This time she did not draw away. They both stood very still for a few seconds.

Then, 'I've made something for you,' Felix said.

'You've made something for me?' she repeated, still gently.

He nodded.

'Why, what?'

'Oh, nothing you want.'

'Let me see it.'

'It's in the closet.' He left Sheilah then, and crossed the room, mumbling, 'It's no good. I did it just to pass the time. You don't have to take it. I don't go in for college life much — so I have to have *something* to do. It's no good. It's nothing anybody'd want ——' And he went all through his apologies still another time, when he came back to her with a big square package done up in white paper.

Sheilah took the package in her arms. He left her with it and went over to the window, and looked out. Her first soft exclamations came to him amidst the rustle of the wrapping paper.

'Why, Felix! How beautiful!' Then, after a pause, 'A box! With my name! And you made it! Why, I — I just can't say *anything*!' And she couldn't. There was a sudden tightening in her

throat that made speech impossible for a moment.

She brushed her hand over the top of the box. It was as smooth as a piano-key almost. The execution of the inlay-work was exquisite. But oh, the design — the design! It wasn't right somehow. The letters were too tall for their width — and were framed too close. It was simply tragic to Sheilah, sensitive to nice proportions, that such infinite pains had been expended on a piece of work that could never be anything but crippled and deformed when finished. Well, Felix shouldn't guess! She went on exclaiming gently, softly. 'There must be hundreds of little pieces! And each one so beautifully fitted! I didn't know you could do this sort of thing! And yet I do remember back in the high-school how you loved manual training. But this is like a piece of jewelry, with the mother-of-pearl in the corners, and everything. It's beautiful!'

'There's something inside,' he told her apologetically.

She placed the box on the desk under the drop-light, which he had lit now, and raised the cover. The box was lined with bright blue satin (Mrs. Sparks had lined it), loose and puffy like a choppy sea with a generous ruffle of white lace all around the edge, and rosettes of lace here and there in the troughs of the waves. It was just like the inside of a work-box, which a sister of Mrs. Sparks had sent her

from Canada twenty years ago, with the addition of a whole package of rose and heliotrope sachet which Mrs. Sparks had shaken generously underneath the blue waves.

It was equipped like the Canadian work-box too. Silently, for a moment Sheilah gazed upon the array before her. There were rows of needle-books of every size. There were bodkins; there were stilettos; there were crochet-hooks; there were knitting-needles; there were carpet needles; there were curious scythe-like-shaped needles.

Sheilah said finally, 'I don't believe there's a thing I shall ever want but what's here,' wondering the while in her heart if there was a thing there she would ever want. 'Who helped you, Felix? Who got all the things?'

He told her. In her mind's eye she saw him slinking into various dry-goods shops, standing, big and awkward and clumsy, before various shop-girls, courageously inquiring for pink darning cotton, blue celluloid thimbles, knitting-needles, and crochet-hooks. Another girl would have felt only a desire to laugh, perhaps. Peggy could have made a delicious story out of it afterwards, no doubt. But not Sheilah. Compassion alone possessed her.

Felix showed her the work-bench later, all beautifully brushed and neat for her inspection. She handled the tools. She stood beside him and tried cutting a thin strip of orange wood herself.

Suddenly she exclaimed, suspicion gripping her, 'When did you begin the box, Felix?'

'When I first knew you were coming. In January sometime.'

'Felix,' she demanded, 'was it the box that made you fail in your exams?'

He lowered his eyes. 'Of course not.'

'It was!' She ejaculated, 'It was the box! You had no time to study!'

'I liked doing it.'

'It was my fault!' she despaired.

'I tell you I liked doing it. I wanted to do it. If you like the thing, I'm glad I did it. I'm glad I flunked. I'd flunk again for you, Sheilah.'

There was a knock on the door.

'They've come for you in the automobile,' Mrs. Sparks announced.

'Tell them I'll be right down,' Sheilah replied, and began wrapping up the box.

Felix went up to her close.

'If I write to you, will you answer it, Sheilah?' he pleaded.

'Of course I will, Felix,' she promised him.

CHAPTER III

I

SHEILAH came tripping down the long flight of gray steps, as light of foot as she had tripped up them a half-hour ago, and took her place between Hunt LeBaron and Peggy in the back of the automobile, apparently as light of heart.

'Now let's go and dance somewhere,' she exclaimed, 'and get some food. I'm starved.'

'Look, boys! Look what she's got!' sang out Peggy, and she tapped the big square package on Sheilah's knees. 'Gosh! your friend may live in a God-forsaken place, but he's certainly all right when it comes to "saying-it-with-candy." A ten-pounder, boys! Come, Sheilah, *we're* starved, too. Open it up, and pass it round.'

'Is that a hint?' laughed Sheilah, grateful with all her heart that Felix's box was of such conventional shape and size. Then, shaking her head tantalizingly, 'Candy isn't good for children before meals. After dinner I'll give you some, perhaps, if you don't tease.'

'Pig!' spat Peggy.

Sheilah ignored her.

'Nevin,' she called out, 'mind stopping at the

telegraph-office as you go through the town? I must wire the family that I'm coming home on the night train.'

A dreadful thing happened when Sheilah was in the telegraph-office. She left Felix's box on the seat she vacated with never a thought that any one would dare touch it. But Peggy would dare touch anything that wasn't labeled dynamite. The first intimation that Sheilah had of the catastrophe was the telltale odor of rose and heliotrope as she approached the car. A moment later she caught a glimpse of bright blue satin and white lace on Peggy's knees, and two bent figures — Hunt and Bertie — evidently picking things up from the floor of the car. Nevin sat in his place behind the wheel.

'I'm terribly sorry,' burst out Peggy at sight of Sheilah, 'but the darned thing was upside down, and every blamed piece of the candy fell out.'

Quite true. Practically everything in Felix's box had become dislodged. What wasn't scattered on the seat and in Peggy's lap, Hunt and Bertie were rescuing from beneath her feet, with accompanying remarks meant to be witty, Sheilah supposed.

'Here's a glacéd strawberry,' scintillated Bertie, holding up the strawberry emery-bag by its loop.

'And a butter-scotch kiss,' Hunt Le Baron followed suit, dangling the mould of beeswax.

'And see the pink lollie-pop, boys, extra size,'

laughed Peggy, waving on high the enameled darning-ball with the handle.

Sheilah ought to have laughed, she supposed, as she thought of the episode afterwards, made light of the joke-making, but she couldn't — she simply couldn't with that old queer feeling of loyalty to Felix, pressing and pushing again. Very quietly she said, 'Please just put them back in the box.' So quietly, in fact, that a pall fell upon the merry-making group.

'Gosh! She's peeved, boys!' ejaculated Peggy.

'Will you let me get in?' asked Sheilah, in the same deadly calm voice. The boys fell back and she stepped up into the car.

'No need of getting mad,' said Peggy. 'I swear I thought it was candy. I'm awfully sorry.'

Sheilah sat down. 'Please give the box to me,' she said, with no sign of relenting.

'Oh, take it! Take your old box!' exclaimed Peggy. If she wouldn't accept an apology, very well!

Sheilah took it, with the dignity it seemed to her a gift, bought at such a price, deserved. In a sort of protecting manner, too, picking out a bit of stray material from the jumble inside, and tossing it away, then putting down the cover and brushing her hand over the inlay work, as if to make sure it had suffered no injury.

'Oh, don't be afraid,' flashed Peggy, 'we haven't

hurt the pretty letters. Oh, look, Hunt! It's her name! I hadn't noticed that before. Did he make it for her all himself?' she mocked.

Sheilah, without so much as a glance at Peggy, proceeded to fold the now torn and crumpled wrapping-paper around the box again.

Peggy continued, 'That's right, don't let it catch cold.'

Hunt snickered out loud at that.

'Oh, shut up,' said Nevin from behind the wheel.

2

Sheilah didn't go out with Nevin alone in the car that night, after all.

She was still clasping Felix's box when her eyes first encountered Nevin's, five minutes after he had ordered silence. He was standing on the curbing by the open door of the car as she stepped out in front of the fraternity house. They were alone for a minute, Peggy and the others having escaped as hastily as possible up the long walk to the door.

He said politely, 'Shall I take it for you?' referring with a nod to Felix's box. The wrapping-paper folded about it was flapping awkwardly in the breeze, and what with the heavy fur coat Sheilah was attempting to carry at the same time, she was obviously overburdened.

'No, thank you,' she replied, instinctively com-

pelled to bear Felix's box herself into the crowded fraternity house, if for no other reason than because it had been jeered at.

Nevin replied, 'Very well,' and shrugged.

'But I'd love to have you take my coat.'

'I see!'

'What do you see?'

'Why, that the coat's less precious. I certainly got your number all wrong, Sheilah,' he went on in a light tone. 'I had no idea there was anything serious between you and that Nawn fellow.'

He simply wanted her to deny that there was anything serious. He wanted her to deny it very much. But she didn't!

Instead, holding her head a little higher she replied, 'Why do you refer to him as "that Nawn fellow"? Just because he isn't in a fraternity?' And the conversation that might have led but for that impulsive wrong turn of Sheilah's to an explanation, and a firm road-bed of understanding, swerved down into miry soil where it sunk deeper and deeper.

'Good Lord, no!' exclaimed Nevin. 'There are lots of good fellows not in fraternities. How protective you are of him! I suppose I should have said "Mister Nawn."''

'You were scornful of him. You know you were!'

'And of course I shouldn't be scornful of any one

who means so much to you. When do you announce it?’

Not that he thought for a minute that there was anything to announce, but it had suddenly become imperative to him to hear her say that there wasn’t. He gave her a second opportunity to tell him there was nothing serious in her relationship with Felix Nawn, and she didn’t take the opportunity!

‘I think you’re going pretty far, Nevin,’ she flashed.

‘Not so far, I guess, as Nawn has gone.’

She shrugged.

They were hurting each other intentionally now.

‘And to think I took you there for the purpose. In my car! Say, that’s funny!’ And he laughed out loud. ‘Took you there, and sat outside in the cold and waited, while you and he were up there in his room having a nice warm time, I suppose.’

Sheilah replied, ‘I think I’d rather go to the concert to-night, after all.’

He retorted lightly, ‘Very well.’

He kept up a gay, blithe manner all the evening and Sheilah responded. He simply scintillated at the dinner-table. So did Sheilah. At the Glee Club Concert, with Sheilah on one side and Peggy on the other, he divided highly amusing remarks equally between them. And Sheilah laughed quite as spontaneously as Peggy. When, at midnight, he stood

with Sheilah on the platform of the railroad station waiting for her train, his indefatigable good spirits still showed no signs of flagging. To the very end he wore the armor gallantly. And Sheilah too.

'I've had a great time,' conventionally she called down to him from the platform of her train.

'Same here,' he called back, as the train began to move.

She saw him, standing below her, bare-headed, high-headed, too, smiling, steadily waving his arm back and forth at her as if he held a banner he'd rather die than lay down. A cloud of smoke crawled up behind him and swallowed him up, unbowed head, waving banner and all. It was the last time Sheilah ever saw Nevin.

3

Peggy and Sheilah shared the drawing-room on the train that night. The impulsive Peggy was already sorry for the part she had played in the automobile that afternoon.

'I was horrid, I guess. I get just full of the dickens sometimes. Do forgive me, Sheilah.'

'I have, long ago,' shrugged Sheilah. 'It's all right.'

Later Peggy said, 'I suppose you know all about him?'

'Felix Nawn, you mean?'

Peggy nodded.

'I ought to. I've known him all my life.'

'Too bad about his being expelled. Hunt LeBaron told me about it, to-night, on the quiet.'

'He's not being expelled. He's being dropped. There's a difference,' said Sheilah.

'Oh, you don't know, then!'

'Know what?' Was there something besides Felix's obscurity to account for the strange smile that had passed between the two boys of whom she had inquired for him?

'I hate to tell you,' said Peggy.

'Well, then, don't.'

But Peggy couldn't resist the temptation.

'He and two other boys are expelled because they were caught cheating in the midyear exams,' she announced.

4

Sheilah climbed into her berth that night with a heart heavier than she had carried since Dr. Sheldon had sent her away to boarding-school. She didn't sleep until towards morning, and then a strange thing happened. For the first time since that terrible night, when her father had held her in his arms, she dreamed about the Chinaman.

CHAPTER IV

I

SHEILAH received her first letter from Felix in less than two weeks. It was postmarked Wallbridge.

'I've gotten a job in the bank here in your city,' it said. 'They say I can work up to almost anything, if I try, and I'm going to try. You know why, I guess. I got it through Mr. Spaulding at the church. I saw you at church last Sunday, but you didn't see me. Will you be at church next Sunday?'

'I'm sorry. I shan't be at church next Sunday,' Sheilah wrote back. Felix's letter had come two days before she was sailing for a second trip to Europe, this time with two boarding-school friends. 'But I'll see you when I come back in the fall,' her pen went on kindly. At least she could be kind. 'I hope you'll get on well at the bank, Felix. I wish you all sorts of good luck.'

That brief little note of Sheilah's became to Felix like a prayer, which he used to read at night for inspiration. He knew it by heart at the end of the first week, but he always referred to the written page, for he liked seeing with his own eyes the actual words Sheilah had written to him, especially his own name, in her handwriting, alone like that, in the middle of

the line. Usually he read it out loud, fondling the words with his voice, as well as with his eyes, stopping a long time after the 'Felix' to let it sink deeper and deeper into his consciousness.

In July she sent him a picture postcard from Switzerland. Across a very blue sky, above a white-capped mountain, she had written a message. 'Hope everything is going beautifully, Sheilah!' To Felix the message became a second prayer to read at night. And not only at night. For not only across the blue sky on the card, but above his head, among the clouds as he walked, he saw her message and her name. He thought the card itself was the most beautiful one he had ever seen. The blue sky flushed into a lovely peach-like pink along the horizon line of the mountain, and she — Sheilah had picked it out for him! He cherished it as if it were a sacred symbol.

The fact was Sheilah had jotted down Felix's initials in the corner of the card, where later the stamp was to be affixed, without even looking at the other side. There had been several other cards, and she had allotted them all in the same hasty fashion, on the eve of the day she was leaving Switzerland. True, later, she had hesitated, pen poised above the blue sky, before writing the message. And afterwards for a moment before adding the address on the other side. But if Felix was to settle in Wall-

bridge, she must establish a practical basis of friendship with him. Surely the careless postcard with a message dashed off across its face, for the world to read, would act as a sort of forerunner of her intentions.

Queer how often Felix was in her thoughts that summer. How persistently she had to crowd him out on the occasions when she was idle. Again and again she saw him standing big and stooped and helpless — a tragic figure — alone in his bare, lonely room, with the yellow sunset behind him, and the box between them, like something deformed, his love for her had brought forth.

She hadn't shown the box to her mother and father. She had hidden it in an empty drawer. It was impossible for her to talk about Felix to any one. She had exchanged with the other girls in the party all sorts of confidences about other affairs — about other love affairs. She had had her share since she had come out. But always she had kept Felix buried, and her feelings about him imprisoned, like the box. Well, she wouldn't, once she was home! Feelings, unlike the box, were alive, and live things shut up in the dark fretted and gnawed. She would let them out. She would let Felix out.

It was with this idea in view that Sheilah recognized Felix openly as her friend when she returned to Wallbridge in the late summer. She re-

turned earlier than she had planned. It was the summer the World War was declared. There was a stampede for early returns to America in August, 1914.

Sheilah saw Felix the first Sunday she went to church, and asked him to drop around in the afternoon. There were usually several callers on Sunday afternoon. A fortnight later she invited him to one of her Sunday-night chafing-dish suppers.

Felix's appearance was not impossible. He had been to college for nearly two years, where at least he saw good taste in clothes on occasions. Moreover, one of the requirements of the position he had taken at the bank was a neat appearance. That was the chief reason why he had taken it. It had seemed to him that a 'gentleman's job,' where he must dress carefully and keep his hands clean, would bring him nearer Sheilah.

Sheilah had influence in Wallbridge since her successful début. She asked her friends to be nice to Felix Nawn. They were, for her sake. But it was an effort. It was awful if you ever got stranded alone with him. Who was he, anyway? And why should Sheilah Miller attempt to float such a piece of dead wood? Yes, some of them did remember that he attended the high-school once upon a time — wasn't he the boy who had cheated once in class and got caught at it? — and that Sheilah Miller used to

be nice to him even then. But, my gracious, that was years ago. However, in the end, they accepted Felix. He was an extra man, and helped augment the group of stags at a subscription dance. He became a familiar object in that group as time went on, and like all familiar objects soon was merged in the general composition of the picture, and was unnoticed and unremarked upon.

Sheilah felt a great comforting sense of satisfaction. Not only was she letting Felix out of the dark, but also she was discharging a debt she felt she owed him. He had been alone and neglected at college. He had failed at college. If she saw to it that he was not alone and neglected in Wallbridge, if she helped him to succeed in Wallbridge, then that strange hungry sense of obligation to him, always fumbling for food just over her heart, would be satisfied, perhaps; would become weaned in time, and she would be free again, and happy, seeing him prosper on the milk of others' kindness.

But to Felix the recognition meant only one thing — chances to see Sheilah. Social functions were torture to Felix, to be endured for the sake of a possible glimpse of Sheilah. Nor did he care for success, only inasmuch as success led to Sheilah. At the dances he attended he seldom took any part, though occasionally he did 'sit out' with a left-over girl, persuaded by an usher. He usually spent his time

with the smokers, in a near-by anteroom (though he never smoked himself), furtively emerging from time to time to look for Sheilah, and possibly to receive one of her smiles as she swept past him. And sometimes he took her home! Very frequently he took her home after the Millers sold their limousine and dismissed the chauffeur.

2

The limousine was sold and the chauffeur dismissed during the second year of the war. Sidney Miller manufactured carpets. There wasn't much demand for carpets during the war. It made it awkward for Sidney because the same month war was declared, he had doubled his capacity for making carpets. The result was he was forced into raising money quickly. Long before it became necessary to sell the limousine and dismiss the chauffeur, Sidney Miller had moved out of his two spacious safe-deposit boxes at the bank, and was paying rent on only one small one. And he rattled around in that! By October, 1915, practically all of the crisp, crinkly papers Sidney used to handle so proudly the first of every month were scattered around in various banks, as collateral, like a family dispersed by force of catastrophic circumstances.

One day it became apparent to Sidney that he had

got to borrow money on the very house he lived in, in order to pay its upkeep. Of course the obvious thing to do was to reduce the upkeep as much as possible.

'Just till the war is over,' he told Dora, making as light of it as he knew how. 'Just till things get straightened out a bit on the other side.'

'I don't mind for myself so much,' Dora said. 'It's Sheilah I'm thinking about. If only she were married and settled and in a home of her own, I'd just as soon go and live in an apartment.'

'I know,' said Sidney. 'The war has come just at the wrong time for Sheilah, I'm afraid.'

'No,' said Dora. 'It would have been worse the year she was coming out. The *débutantes* aren't going to have a bit of a good time this fall.'

Sidney smiled wearily.

'That's too bad for the *débutantes*,' he replied.

3

Sheilah didn't mind the economies. The chauffeur wasn't the only member of the Miller ménage who was dismissed that fall. Sheilah said she liked making her own bed, and argued that it was splendid preparation for marrying a poor man.

'If there are any men, rich or poor, left after this dreadful war to marry,' sighed her mother. 'I just

know all our boys will get drawn into it before it's over. If ever I was glad you're a girl, it's now.'

Sheilah had looked grave.

'It might drag even a girl in, mother,' she had replied.

CHAPTER V

I

ONE reason why Felix Nawn found himself, to his delight, conveying Sheilah home from so many evening engagements during the second winter of the war, was because there were fewer other men to perform the service. The girls in Wallbridge felt the dearth of young men at their parties almost as soon as war was declared. Nevin Baldwin had set the pace.

Dressed in an English uniform, Nevin was fighting in France before the first Christmas, and imbued with Nevin Baldwin's example, a dozen or more young men in Wallbridge managed somehow to get onto the other side that first winter. Of course there were still many young men left, but none Sheilah could impose upon as upon Felix. It really wasn't imposing upon Felix. It was bestowing.

Sheilah was aware of the unabated intensity of Felix's devotion, but she believed she had become acclimatized to it now, as one does after a while to a tropical climate, and knew how to adapt herself to it. How unwise it was, for instance, ever to allow the direct rays of the heat to touch her. And what methods to employ to protect herself against ex-

posure. She ran to cover now always at the slightest contact of Felix's scorching hand or foot — for still they scorched. He never held her wrists now, though sometimes they skated together.

One starlight night they had skated as far as the old ice-house. They had hobbled on their skates over the snow to an open gash in the side of the building, and peered in. But they had not gone in. He had not kissed her. He had never kissed her since that far-away afternoon at dusk. But he had murmured, standing very close behind her, 'I still think of it — every night, Sheilah.'

Instantly she had moved away.

'Come on, let's skate. I hate this spooky place.' She had laughed. So long as there was the shelter of careless good-comradeship for her to run to, she was not afraid of sunstroke.

When Felix had first appeared among the callers on Sunday afternoon, Dora had strongly objected. She had had a talk with Sheilah. With John Sheldon, too. But time had reassured Dora. By the second year of the war, Dora had concluded Felix was harmless. And but for the war Felix would have remained harmless. But for the thorough upheaval of Sheilah's straight, careful furrows of peace-time plans and resolves, her patriotism and pity and love would not have become so hopelessly confused, and her garden would have grown in rows.

The girls in Wallbridge, as the war persisted, became more and more possessed with a desire to serve, and in some more personal way than rolling bandages or writing letters to unknown soldiers. Several became nurses and joined hospital units going to France; others secretaries, or war-time workers of one kind and another, and went to Washington. But nothing in the way of service that necessitated absence from home was to be thought of as far as Sheilah was concerned. Her father hadn't been very well lately, and such a look of distress would cross her mother's face, if she even referred to leaving home, that Sheilah put all hope of it out of her mind. But the prick that she wasn't doing her share recurred again and again.

In the fall of 1916 came the news of the death in action of Nevin Baldwin. It stirred the city to its depths. His mother in her deep mourning became a symbol epitomizing all the mourning mothers on the other side. The reality of the war struck deep into every woman's heart in Wallbridge.

Within a fortnight after the news of the death of Nevin Baldwin, Millicent Phillips, a friend of Sheilah's and her own age, sailed for England with her mother, to be married quietly to one of the boys who had enlisted in the Canadian Army. Three months later, Millicent Phillips — Millicent Blake then — was wearing mourning also.

There followed several war marriages then, and by the time the United States entered the war in April, 1917, there was quite a little group of war-brides in Wallbridge. By June, 1917, the group had doubled.

Sheilah helped double it.

2

Sheilah told John Sheldon that one reason she was going to marry Felix was because he looked so funny — or was it tragic — in his uniform. She hadn't known whether to laugh or cry. It was much too small and second-hand. It strained at the buttons across the front, and wrinkled in tight folds across the back, and bulged and protruded, as if it was stuffed. And it was just a private's uniform, too!

One of the women at the Red Cross Headquarters who had seen Felix had described him, and everybody at the table had laughed. Sheilah had been at the table. She herself hadn't seen Felix then (he was just back on his first twenty-four-hour leave from training-camp). But he came around that evening. The woman had said Felix looked more like one of those dummies they use for bayonet practice at training-camp than a human being. And another had answered, that from what she had heard of him, she guessed he'd act like a dummy too. She couldn't imagine Felix Nawn bayoneting back.

'I thought it was so cruel to say that! And I told her so. It's easier for some boys, than for others, to go into this war, Dr. Sheldon. People don't know what courage it took for Felix. It wasn't the bayonets he was afraid of so much (I don't believe he has looked that far ahead), as of what comes before — the life at a training-camp. The crowds. Being slow and awkward and made fun of. You know comradeship can be awfully cruel if it isn't kind, and Felix is aware of it. He has had experience. And yet knowing what torture it would be to him, he went into it. He didn't have to. His eyes aren't right, but I told him about a boy I knew who got a copy of one of those test-cards they use for eyes and learned it by heart. And Felix did the same thing. And got by! It was I who got a copy of the test-card for Felix, Dr. Sheldon. It was I who helped him learn it. All of a sudden Felix found himself plunged into what was a kind of hell to him. That's what he told me camp-life was to him, but he said he didn't care if it was what I wanted. Why, of course, I had to do *my* part. When I saw Felix that first night, crammed into that ridiculous uniform and realized that it was all my own work, I'd have felt the worst traitor in the world not to have accepted it as mine.'

'Perhaps,' suggested John Sheldon quietly, 'just because it was an object for ridicule was why you accepted it. Pity and loyalty are often confused.'

'Well,' Sheilah admitted, 'perhaps if Felix were a fine and splendid figure in his uniform whom everybody praised and admired, he wouldn't need me and my loyalty so much. But oh — don't you see, as it is, he has no one else — nothing else — but me in the world, to make up a little for all he is suffering? I've talked to mother. I've tried to explain. But she just can't see it.'

That was why Sheilah was seated at three o'clock in the afternoon in John Sheldon's office — because Dora couldn't see it. Nor Sidney either. Distraught, they had both sought John Sheldon the night before. He told them to send Sheilah around sometime, and he'd talk it over with her.

'It strikes me a promise of marriage is pretty big recompense for a girl to pay a man for doing his duty,' he remarked when Sheilah paused.

'It doesn't strike me so,' instantly she replied. And John could feel the iron in her. 'Nor my friends either. We think it's the least a girl can do for a boy who is willing to risk his life. It's been done before, you know I'm not the only girl who has married a soldier just before he went to war.'

'But usually the girl loves the soldier, Sheilah.'

She didn't flinch at that.

'I do, too,' she replied.

'You love Felix?'

'I think so,' she went on, calm, quiet, judicial. 'I

think I always have. I've always fought it — you helped me fight it — because I knew it would disappoint mother and father so. And perhaps,' she added candidly, 'because I was a little too proud.'

'Don't you think a girl should feel pride in the man she marries, war or no war?'

She held her head a little higher.

'I do feel pride! Just think what Felix is doing! Why he may come back blind! I *do* feel pride!' she repeated, and she flushed.

John Sheldon turned his eyes away from the flame in her cheeks. What fires a war can kindle!

'Do you think,' he pursued, 'you can feel pride in him in peace as well as in war?'

'I should hope I would always remember what he has done,' she said.

'Do you think you can be happy with him during the long years after this brief war is over?'

She made a little impatient gesture at that. 'Oh, that's what mother says. Always discussing my own little state of happiness. Dr. Sheldon, I don't think it's a time for any girl — for any human being to be splitting hairs about individual happiness just now. If any one can do *anything* to help win this war, I think it ought to be done, and *quick*, too. Nevin Baldwin wasn't thinking about his individual happiness, I guess, when he rushed up over that trench at four o'clock in the morning.'

'Will it help win the war for you to marry Felix?'

'Oh, only indirectly, I suppose,' she sighed, 'by making the man I sent into it a little bit happier. But it's all I *can* do. It's the only way I *can* take part. And I do want to take part so! I don't want to be a slacker, Dr. Sheldon. You see,' she shrugged, 'I'm one of those individuals who didn't enlist early. I wanted to be a nurse — awfully. If I was a nurse in France, it wouldn't be my duty, perhaps, to marry Felix. But it *is* my duty now. I've been drafted, don't you see? I've been drafted for this job, and I'm not going to run away from it. You can talk till doom's-day.'

'I think your mother might let you be a nurse in France now,' remarked John Sheldon, 'if you'll break off with Felix.'

'Break off with Felix? Now? Why, it would kill him. He's always cared so terribly — so *simply* *terribly*. No. It's too late now.'

'But ——'

'Oh, let's not talk about it.' She stood up. 'It won't do the least good. You must reconcile mother and father to it. Make them realize, somehow, there is a war going on. Other girls' parents understand and coöperate. I wish they would. Then I would be happy. I did so want to please them when I married.'

'But you won't actually marry Felix, will you?'

'Not unless he's sent across. I shall give him *everything* if he's sent across, for perhaps that woman was right about the bayonet. I have an idea, if Felix goes across, he'll never come back.'

3

But he did come back, without a decoration or a stripe of any kind, in a private's uniform, as he went. He came back for his reward, three weeks after the armistice was signed, without ever having gotten beyond a training-camp in England, where he took care of horses. And Sheilah, head high, shoulders squared, began her term of service.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER I

I

SHEILAH knelt down before the gas stove and opened the door. She drew the roasting-pan toward her a little way, and proceeded to baste the round mound of sizzling flesh, turning her face away as it spurted and fumed at her as if it protested. It was a terribly hot day. Already 92 by the thermometer on the shaded back porch, and it wasn't twelve o'clock yet. Why had she attempted to roast a beef to-day? And why did she care how it was roasted? Just so it wasn't raw? Just so it was material to keep the children alive and the doctor's bills low? She shoved the beef back into place and closed the oven door.

When she stood up she leaned a moment against the kitchen table and closed her eyes. Lately, when she stood up, things swam and looked dark for a moment afterward. And it was necessary to lean down so often! There were so many things to pick up in a small apartment, with three children and no one but a seventeen-year-old negro girl, who came Monday mornings and two afternoons a week, to help. She opened her eyes and gazed through the liquid air in which she found she was still immersed,

at the alarm-clock on the kitchen mantel. Eleven-thirty, and she hadn't as much as glanced into the boys' room yet. She knew how it would look.

She wasn't disappointed. Standing in the doorway, leaning against the casing, she sighed. Not so much at the confusion that met her eyes — untidy beds, open bureau drawers, books, toys, children's clothes of all descriptions, scattered everywhere in dreadful disarray, as at the proof it was to her of her failure as a mother. Children shouldn't be allowed to leave a room in such a condition. But lately it was so much easier not to discipline — pick up the toys, close the drawers, hang up the clothes herself. Quietly. Without controversy. It occurred to her that it would be easier still to leave the room as it was. After all, making a bed was but a convention. Why bother so? But even while she contemplated this new avenue of escape she was putting the beds into some sort of order, pulling up the blankets, tucking them in. She ought to change the sheets, she supposed, and she hadn't turned the mattresses for weeks! But she was so tired, and no one would know or care.

That was one advantage in having moved away from Wallbridge. Keeping up appearances even to the extent of clean sheets had been such a burden in Wallbridge. She had been proud then. She hadn't wanted pity from her friends. She and Felix had

been living for nearly ten years now, in the crowded, wooden-apartment district on the edge of Boston, as far removed as possible from the desirable suburbs; and ideally inconveniently located in relation to the automobile road to Wallbridge. Her old friends had not attempted to look her up. She had practically no callers. Even her own mother, before she had died, had come very seldom. There was no necessity for making the beds at all. Why did she keep on doing it morning after morning? The woman downstairs didn't.

She was again leaning against a table, waiting to rise to the surface of the dizziness into which again she had plunged (after having captured an elusive shoe from under the far corner of one of the beds), when she heard the screen door to the back porch slam. And steps. A child's steps. Roddie's she thought. Why was he home from school so early? She went to the kitchen door. Yes, Roddie crying. Standing in the middle of the kitchen, his face all red and distorted, like one of those toy faces made of pliable red rubber that can be squeezed into unpleasant expressions, both his hands shoved into his trousers pockets. Baggy trousers. Too big for him. So was the coat.

Most of Roddie's clothes were too big. Felix's sister Gretchen had a boy a few years older than Roddie. It was very kind of Gretchen to send Sam's

outgrown things to Roddie. They were not usually badly worn. The sexton's son, whom Gretchen had married, had done well. He had become a successful automobile agent. He lived in Detroit, Michigan, owned two cars, and Gretchen kept two maids.

'What's the matter?' said Sheilah to Roddie, not approaching. He didn't act like a child in pain.

He glanced up at her out of his little bright, slanting eyes, and then down again quickly. He never carried his head high, but now he would have hidden it completely under a wing if he had had one.

'What have you done?' asked Sheilah, her voice more weary than severe in spite of her efforts.

For answer he drew his hands from his trousers pocket and offered her a crumpled note, then pushed by her, and sobbing out loud went into the bedroom Sheilah had just left.

Sheilah opened the note. It was signed by Roddie's teacher. She read it hastily — only the important words registering. 'Not his first offense. Going on all winter more or less. Have talked to him repeatedly. Useless. Thought best to send him home to you — we consider cheating —' She got no further.

Roddie! Cheating!

She closed her eyes a moment and leaned her forehead against the back of her hand that held the crumpled note. Then groped her way to Roddie who

was lying on the bed, which she had just made. She sat down beside him and put her hand upon him.

'Is this true, Roddie?'

A big sob jerked his hunched shoulders and he tried to burrow his head further out of sight. It was sufficient acknowledgment.

Silently Sheilah gazed upon him. He was curled up as tight as a fallen caterpillar — his knees drawn up to meet his chin, his hands tucked out of sight, his face completely hidden. Only the back of his head was visible — a bit of dark thick hair rumped and clotted. Roddie's hair never lay straight because of the two cowlicks like Felix's. Sheilah sighed. Another Felix. Yes, another Felix. And inside as well as out!

Oh, how useless it had been all these years to combat a law so much stronger than herself. Well, she wouldn't combat it any longer. She would accept it. Perhaps she would be happier. An animal in captivity suffers less when it has at last learned the wisdom of not attempting to break bars.

'Get up and wash your face,' she said quietly to Roddie. 'I must get dinner.' And she went out into the kitchen, and knelt down before the gas stove, and mechanically set to basting the roast beef again.

after one. The public school they all attended was just around the corner. Laetitia was three years older than Roddie, and Phillip was three years younger, and Esther (Esther, whom she mustn't think about) was three years younger than Phillip. Or would have been three years younger if she had lived.

Sheilah had given them the nicest names she knew. Rodney had been her favorite boy's name ever since she was a little girl. It stood for courage and honesty, straight shoulders and a clear eye; Laetitia for the sort of charm and delicacy one finds in fragile, slender-stemmed flowers; Phillip was the name of a young prince to her; and Esther had always meant a beautiful, white, still star. But they weren't like their names, except Esther, and Esther hadn't lived.

Strange how the fact that Esther hadn't lived kept repeating itself to Sheilah whenever she was tired, or particularly discouraged, outweighing in its significance the immediate cause for her despair. Of them all Esther hadn't lived, and of them all, Esther had been the only one who hadn't looked like a little Chinese baby when she was born — dark, amber-colored almost, with a lot of black straight hair and little red puffs with slanting slits in them for eyes. Well, she was glad Esther hadn't lived now. Poor little alien here.

Sheilah managed with the help of a wet dish-cloth

and a charred iron-holder to lift the beef onto the top of the stove. It was nearly enough done, she guessed. Then she sat down, and leaning her head on her hand, supported by her elbow resting on the kitchen table, she closed her eyes. She wished she could cry. Ever since Esther had died all her eyes ever did was just to smart. All her heart ever did, too! Esther had died nearly a year ago, now. She ought to be getting used to it by this time. But she wasn't getting used to it! There had been something so comforting — so completing about Esther, as if she had at last found a part of herself, for which she had been looking for a long while, and it made her whole.

Esther and Sheilah had been as alike as two flowers on the same stem. Esther had had corn-flower blue eyes and corn-silk gold hair. When she was two years old Sheilah had cut off one of the transparent curls of fragile gold, that drifted around her head as light as floating bubbles, and placed it in an envelope with a curl of her own, which her mother had cut at the same age. And now she couldn't tell the two pressed circles apart. They were as alike as two petals of the same flower.

Not only did the blue and gold match, but other things, such as smiles, pitch of voice, and set of head, and a certain poise and dignity that graced even a high-chair. And such daintiness! How Es-

ther had loved things clean! There had always been clean sheets often enough on Esther's bed. Esther used to pat the fresh linen gratefully with her delicate finger-tips. And Sheilah would pat it, too, and their eyes would meet in mutual appreciation. Oh, if only Esther had lived, then it wouldn't matter so much if Laetitia was a second Gretchen. Roddie could cheat, and Phillip could stay on indefinitely in the first grade, and still there would be joy left in living — justification for effort, recompense for disappointment, reward for perseverance. Oh well, she mustn't think about Esther. It was better for Esther not to have lived. She rose. She must make the gravy.

3

'Gosh! But it's sizzling in here!' exclaimed Laetitia when she entered the kitchen five minutes later.

She was what would be called a big girl for her age — full-hipped, round-busted, and not used enough yet to her recently acquired woman's contour to know how to dress to become it.

Sheilah let the 'gosh' pass without comment to-day. Laetitia heard a great deal of slang at school. Sheilah had never been able to make it clear to Laetitia why slang, and now, of late, scented powder and rouge, were undesirable in so young a girl. All the other girls at school, Laetitia argued, used all

three; and Aunt Gretchen, whom Laetitia visited last summer, hadn't minded a bit.

Roddie had appeared from the bedroom by this time. He had stopped crying, but his face was red and swollen.

'What sort of a scrape's he got into?' demanded Laetitia.

'Never mind,' said Sheilah briefly. Then, 'if you don't care, children,' she went on, 'I'll carve the meat out here to-day — and not bother to set the table, it's so hot. Go and wash your face and hands, Phillip.'

Phillip had arrived now. Phillip was as little and shrunken as Laetitia was big and overgrown. The doctor had had a hard time with Phillip when he was a baby, persuading him to grow, and now his teachers were having an equally hard time persuading him to read. But he had clever fingers. As a baby he had loved to sit beside Felix evenings at the work-bench in the dining-room, and hold the delicate parts of the miniature furniture his father made, while the glue dried. 'Steady as a vise,' Felix used to say. Now Phillip was old enough to work on the furniture himself. He did practically all the sand-papering. And the rungs of some of the chairs were as slender as jack-straws. There was a suggestion of Sheilah about Phillip. His eyes were corn-flower blue, but the rest of him was like his Grandfather

Nawn, even to the crooked, undershot teeth. The teeth must be straightened sometime. It would take a great deal of money, and perhaps he wouldn't be any better off for it. Why fight nature so?

4

'What's the matter?' Laetitia asked her mother before she went back to school for the afternoon study-period; for Sheilah had gone to her bedroom and lain down, as soon as she had carved the meat.

'Just the heat, I think.'

'Can I do anything?'

Laetitia was the best-intentioned girl in the world. Often she wanted to help, but she did it so awkwardly! Sheilah would be ever so grateful now for a little cold water in the hot-water bag to put at the back of her neck. She often gave the children cold water like that on hot nights. But no, she'd get it herself later.

'No, dear, thank you,' she replied.

Laetitia crossed the room, picked up Sheilah's silver hand mirror from the bureau, carried it close to the window, and fell to inspecting a small red spot on her chin.

'Please put my mirror down,' said Sheilah.

'I'm not hurting it.'

'But I do so want to be quiet.'

'I wasn't making a noise.'

'And alone.'

'Oh, all right,' said Laetitia, and Sheilah, from behind her closed eyes, heard her cross the room, on her heels, heavily, as her own mother used to walk, and lay the mirror down. And as she had longed for a closed door between herself and her mother, now she longed for it between herself and her child. A punishment perhaps. No, she was too sensible to believe that! Simply Nature repeating itself according to its way.

On the threshold Laetitia turned and hesitated.

'I wanted to ask you something.'

'What is it?'

'After supper can I go to the Movies to-night? The gang's all going, but I told them there wasn't any use my even asking.'

'Why — yes — go if you want to.'

'What?'

'I said, go, go, dear, if you want to.'

'The name of the picture is "His Six Wives."' remarked Laetitia.

'Is it? Well, do as you want to. I don't care, Please close the door when you go out.'

CHAPTER II

I

'MOTHER's sick,' Laetitia told her father that night. She was at the corner to meet him when he got off the electric car, at half-past six. He had had his coat off when he left the car, it was such a hot day, and he carried his straw hat in his hand. But as soon as he reached the sidewalk he set down his brown leather hand-bag on the curbing, and put his hat and coat on again. Then wiped his face carefully with his handkerchief. He never went home to Sheilah, even after all these years, without thinking how he looked.

'Sick?' he repeated after Laetitia, and a frightened expression crossed his face. He flushed faintly. 'What's the matter?'

'I don't know. She just doesn't seem to care about anything, and asked me to get supper. She's lying down on the bed. I wanted to go to the Movies to-night, and she says I can, but I won't if she doesn't want me to.'

Felix said dully, 'It must be the heat. She works too hard,' and he leaned and picked up his bag, and the frightened look gave way to that expression of long-continued acquiescence that some men wear,

some women, who carry a hidden burden — a hidden burden that in Felix's case had grown heavier and heavier with the years, as it became more and more evident to him what he had done to Sheilah.

He hadn't meant to. He had meant to be all the things Sheilah believed he could be, that he believed he could be too, with such a talisman. He had thought that the miracle of his marriage to Sheilah must perform some sort of magic upon him; that no one could enter the charmed atmosphere that surrounded Sheilah without becoming charmed a little by it, too. But somehow the magic hadn't worked, the charm had failed, and instead of growing into the image of Sheilah, as he had so tried to do, she had somehow grown into the image of him. The home he provided for her, for instance, where she lay sick and broken this afternoon, much more resembled the grimy white house where he was born on nondescript Flower Street in Wallbridge, than the cool, broad-verandahed, lawn-surrounded mansion where Sheilah had lived as a young girl.

The mansion had been made over into an apartment house now. It had been sold at the end of the war for just enough to wipe out a list of debts that had to be paid when Sheilah's father died, soon after peace was declared. Her mother had lived on alone afterward in one of the made-over apartments on the income from one small life-insurance policy.

When Felix had come back to Sheilah at the end of the war, he had been fired with determination to fill the big rôle waiting for him — so much bigger, now that Sheilah was in actual need of a man and provider. He had returned to his place in the bank full of hope and confidence. Sheilah, too, had been full of hope and confidence then. They had taken a small half-house near the golf club. Not expensive, because so far out from the center of the city.

How hard Felix had tried at first to pull himself out of his own personality. He had read every article Sheilah marked for him, so as to appear informed among her friends. Tried to learn bridge. Tried to learn golf. For in those early years in Wallbridge they had, as a matter of course, belonged to the group of young married people who had always been Sheilah's friends. Successful confident young married people. Rather ruthless since the war. Amazingly able and alert. Difficult competitors.

It had been Sheilah's suggestion that they move away from Wallbridge. Felix always dreaded any change, but he complied, for Sheilah explained to him that there was a future for him in the big prosperous manufacturing concern in Boston, if he tried hard and worked evenings. And he had tried hard! He had worked evenings! They both had worked evenings.

Felix had been in the sales department of the big manufacturing concern. There was little written on good salesmanship that Sheilah didn't read out loud to him, night after night, during their first months in Boston. Also, night after night, she had set him to work writing test business letters (for the new position required a limited amount of simple correspondence), which she corrected afterward. Felix used to fall asleep sometimes, from sheer exhaustion, while she was explaining the correct use of certain business terms and phrases. He never complained, however. He was too anxious for the promised reward.

But Sheilah had been mistaken about that. There wasn't a future for Felix in that business after all. One Saturday afternoon Felix's employer sent for him and told him so; and added that as soon as he was able to place himself elsewhere it would not inconvenience the concern to let him go at any moment.

Felix had been placing himself elsewhere (or else Sheilah had been placing him) half-a-dozen times since then, and always each new position had been a little further down the ladder than the one before.

2

Felix didn't work evenings at all now. That is, he didn't work at books and letters. He worked at his

carpenter's bench. Felix used to keep his carpenter's bench in an unused corner of the cellar in Wall-bridge. And again at first in Boston in a similar unused corner, underneath a dim window by the furnace. And indulged his whim only occasionally — sometimes on Sunday afternoons, and on holidays. But now he worked at it every night.

Sheilah had felt a sharp sting of remorse when she had seen the pleased look on Felix's face, when she first suggested that he set up the carpenter's bench in the dining-room. He had told her he would keep it very neat and wouldn't leave any shavings around at all. He always brushed up ever so carefully before he went to bed. Sheilah used to like to think that perhaps Esther's love of neatness came from Felix, too.

Felix was aware that the carpenter's bench was a symbol of his failure, for Sheilah had not suggested its installation in the dining-room until after it had been proved that he was unable to put his free time to any better use. He became, therefore, pathetically anxious to make it a source of income. It couldn't amount to much, of course, but even a few dollars would help to justify the hours he spent at it. There was a shop in town where he took the pieces of furniture as soon as they were finished, to be sold on commission. The money he thus earned he would bring back to Sheilah with shy and eager

joy. He had six dollars for her to-night! He had sold the four Windsor chairs she had designed (she always did the designing) and the little table. But since Laetitia's news his joy had turned to shame. He wanted to hide the paltry six dollars. How far would six dollars go toward getting Sheilah out of this heat? Contempt for his trivial tinkering produced Felix. Contempt for himself.

Contempt for himself was always sharper when Sheilah was sick or tired. It hurt terribly lately, because he knew now, and Sheilah knew too, that his failure was final. He was no longer young. His hair was grey at the temples, and his face bore deep lines and shadows. He looked years older than he really was, as he plodded home that night beside Laetitia, almost as tall as he. He had always stooped. He stooped more now. The leather bag, light as it was (it carried only his lunch each day, and sometimes the doll's furniture), dragged down one shoulder lower than the other. And he limped. For although Felix had never seen France he had been wounded in the war. It wasn't a wound he could boast of, however. One of the horses he had taken care of had kicked him in the back.

3

He tiptoed into Sheilah's presence ten minutes later.

'What is it?' He was alarmed. It was so seldom Sheilah gave up entirely like this.

She had tried not to. But in the middle of the afternoon the dizziness had become actual nausea. And again at six o'clock. Fear had gripped her. But she couldn't tell Felix her fear. She must spare him as long as there was doubt. He knew what a terrible fear it was to her (and had been ever since Esther had died), and now, suddenly, so much more terrible, since Roddie had been sent home from school for cheating — since it had been demonstrated that she was unable to mould perfect vases out of imperfect clay. Oh, she didn't want any more imperfect clay!

She wouldn't tell Felix either that Roddie had cheated. He had become very sensitive about his own early offenses. She had referred to them occasionally as a warning to him to be honest in his business life. But not lately. It hurt him so.

'It's just the heat, I think,' she said.

'After supper, when it's cooler, I'll take you down to City Point, or somewhere.'

'Oh, no. Not to-night. I couldn't, Felix.'

He gazed at her a moment helplessly, then leaned and picked up the hot-water bottle, which lay discarded on the floor. Three minutes later he brought it back to Sheilah filled with ice-water, and laid it beside her. 'It had gotten warm,' he remarked.

Then crossed the room and shoved back the limp sash curtains to let in a little more air if possible.

Sheilah lay silent and unresponsive. She was aware of the tender, fumbling attentions. Always trying so hard. She would thank him later. But not now. She couldn't now. Only one thought was in her mind now — one fear, crowding out everything else. She didn't want any more imperfect clay. Oh, she couldn't have any more imperfect clay!

4

But Sheilah wasn't going to have any more imperfect clay. The relief was so great at first that for days she ignored the persistent sensation of nausea, and queer gripping attacks of tiredness that would steal upon her every few hours, fling heavy arms about her and bear down on her, till she drooped and succumbed.

One afternoon Felix brought a doctor home with him. The doctor stayed an hour, and returned several days later. Again returned several days later. And again. And still again. Five visits in all. Five times five is twenty-five dollars. On his fifth visit Dr. Evarts told Sheilah he could find no physical cause for her sensations. Sheilah, again from a sense of relief (for she had begun to be afraid that there might be something organic and expensive the matter with her), ignored the sickness and fatigue,

and went on steadily making beds, picking up rooms, roasting beef, and suppressing the unreasonable irritation she felt over such natural and inevitable noises as Laetitia's heavy tread, Roddie's chronic cough, Phillip's sand-papering, and the whirr of Felix's saw.

In the privacy of his office, Dr. Evarts told Felix that Sheilah must get away to some restful place in the country, or by the sea, alone — or else — he shook his head. He had questioned Sheilah. He knew her history. He had talked over the telephone with her old doctor in Wallbridge. Nervous breakdowns had a tendency to repeat themselves, he told Felix. They were serious things. To be avoided. He went into detail. Oh, no, a week would scarcely do any good. Six weeks anyway. Better two months.

Felix, too, lay awake a good deal that June, on his couch in the dining-room, whither he had moved since Sheilah hadn't been feeling well, listening to the creak of the brass bed in the adjoining room, as Sheilah turned and tossed, watching for the disturbingly frequent glow of her light, his slow, laborious thoughts playing with frightening possibilities.

He must raise the money somehow! He visited frequently the shop in town where his furniture was sold. His 'chef-d'œuvre,' as Sheilah always referred

to it, was still there waiting for a customer. A doll-house, completely furnished, eight rooms and bath, with actual running water. It had taken Felix the better part of two years to build and furnish the doll-house. The shop-keeper had told him if he waited, some day a man or woman would come along, the wealthy parent of some particularly cherished child, who would pay the two hundred dollars the house was well worth, and think the more of it because it wasn't cheap. But they weren't likely to come in summer. Felix fumbled for other possible ways out.

Felix was working in the office of a large wholesale concern. He had been there for nearly four years. He had started in as a time-keeper, but had drifted through various positions to that of sort of errand-boy or general utility man to Mr. Fairchild, the general manager. He did everything for Mr. Fairchild from clearing up his desk every night to running his automobile in emergencies. Mr. Fairchild trusted Felix absolutely. Last week he had sent him over to the bank with an envelope full of bonds. Last month he had taken Felix with him to help cut a big crop of coupons.

CHAPTER III

I

SOMETIMES Sheilah wished that Dr. Evarts had found something organic the trouble with her after all. Then there would be something tangible to fight. To be told by him lightly, over and over again, that there was no reason for her sensations — that she was 'perfectly sound physically' (she thought she would scream the next time he said that) filled her with shame and self-contempt. She had always scorned women who imagined themselves sick. Dr. Evarts always left her in deep despair.

He would have been surprised. He supposed assurances cheered her up. He did not make light of her condition when talking to Felix, but he was of the school which believes it is folly to take a patient into one's confidence. It was better to get Sheilah's mind off herself. Talk about something else, anything else, an anecdote, a funny story would do. Make her laugh! Dr. Evarts was under the impression that all patients like a cheerful doctor. He was always in the pink of condition himself — never tired, never depressed — a big blond man, as sunny in appearance as in manner. One of his patients had told Sheilah once that Dr. Evarts was like a shaft

of sunlight in a sickroom. 'Perhaps,' sighed Sheilah despairingly, after one of his vivacious calls, 'but to aching eyes sunlight may sometimes be painful.'

She wished she could talk to Dr. Sheldon — quiet, grave, listening Dr. Sheldon. Never very merry. He never tried to make her smile. Dr. Sheldon was like a gently drawn curtain in a sick room when one is tired and would like to go to sleep. But it would mean a trip to Wallbridge. She could not afford unnecessary trips.

On a certain morning in late June, Sheilah woke to the realization that she must somehow muster enough strength to go in town to do some necessary shopping for the children. It had been haunting her for a week. Every necessity haunted her lately, loomed ahead of her like a menacing calamity. She postponed the dreaded shopping-tour until after lunch, and then, after the children had gone back to school, sprang up from the couch, put on her hat, and plunged out into the midday sun and heat in desperate and unintelligent determination.

Sheilah was crossing a crowded thoroughfare two hours later, when somebody spoke her name from the back of an automobile which the traffic policeman had brought to a standstill immediately in front of her. Her hands were full of packages. She usually paid and carried.

'Why, it's Sheilah, isn't it?' the voice exclaimed.

(‘No, no! It isn’t Sheilah!’) Sheilah wanted to reply, and might have, too, in all honesty, for it really wasn’t the Sheilah Cicely Morgan had known so many years ago.

It was Cicely Morgan in the back of the automobile. Cicely had spent most of her time in Europe since the war. Sheilah hadn’t seen Cicely for over a dozen years. But it was the same Cicely, with the same smooth manner, and still very beautiful in spite of the bit of white hair that showed from beneath the brim of her perfect, close-fitting little hat — still a perfect, close-fitting little hat.

Sheilah’s hat was anything but perfect and close-fitting — it had always been too big in the crown — and her dress, a black cotton marquisette with white polka-dots, which she had bought for fifteen dollars in a department-store basement, was anything but perfect and close-fitting too. She wished the traffic policeman would wave his hand and let her escape. But he didn’t. She found herself acknowledging her identity in spite of herself.

‘Yes, it’s I — Sheilah. Hello, Cicely!’ She smiled, and her eyes brightened. It took more than broken nerves, a body that ached, and clothes that were cheap and shabby, to rob Sheilah of her charm of manner.

‘Get in. Let me take you where you’re going,’ said Cicely.

'Oh, no, thank you.'

'Parsons, open the door.'

The chauffeur sprang quickly from his place behind the wheel and flung open wide the door in front of Sheilah. Sheilah felt like a mouse being scuttled into a trap. She looked helplessly to left and right. The car in front had begun to move. She heard the shrill, impatient whistle of the policeman.

'Get in, my dear,' ordered Cicely, 'You're holding up the traffic.'

'But I'm only going as far as the subway,' Sheilah objected as she sank into the cushioned seat beside Cicely.

'I'll drop you anywhere,' said Cicely.

But Cicely didn't drop Sheilah until they had reached a wooden apartment house, in such a row of wooden apartment houses as Cicely had never dropped any one before.

Too tactful to refer to the number of Sheilah's packages, or to remark upon how tired and ill she looked, Cicely had made excuse that she had long been intending to look Sheilah up, and here was the very opportunity! She had finished her shopping, was, in fact, on her way home. She had no dinner engagement. She didn't care when she reached Wallbridge.

'But the trolley-cars take me within a block of my door,' said Sheilah.

'I shall take you within the width of the sidewalk of your door,' announced Cicely.

No use to contend! Oh, well, never mind. What did it matter? Let Cicely see where she lived if she wanted to, how she lived too. She didn't care.

With sudden abandon, Sheilah found herself saying to Cicely when the car slid to a silent standstill before her own eight-belled front door, 'Wont you come in and see the children?'

Cicely replied, 'Just for a minute, I'd like to.'

All the way up the not-too-clean front stairs, through the two long halls smelling of preparing suppers, Sheilah had a strong desire to sit down somewhere and burst into laughter — into long, relieving, racking peals of laughter.

Instead — stopping a moment before unlocking the door upon the untidiness she knew was awaiting her just inside (she had been so tired after lunch), she turned and looked at Cicely, and said quietly, '*This* is what life has done to me, Cicely.'

Cicely replied with the same simple candor, placing her hand upon Sheilah's arm, 'I was afraid so, when I saw you,' and pretense fell away from between the two women like a veil, and they stood looking at each other with cleared vision.

Afterward Cicely and Sheilah sat for a long while on the couch in the dining-room. Sheilah found it easy to tell Cicely things she had never told any one

before. She did not talk disloyally of Felix, nor despairingly of her life — simply answered Cicely's tactful questions honestly, listlessly, and found immense relief in doing so.

The children came in later, and shook hands with Cicely, then stole out again into an adjoining room to gaze through a half-closed door at the lovely lady mother had brought home, in the big automobile out in front. At a little after six Felix came in and shook hands, too, apologizing uncomfortably for the way he looked, then also stole out into an adjoining room.

2

Cicely was very thoughtful as she drove home that night, alone in the back of her car, underneath the stars. Her life had not been rich with close relationships. She had never married. Denied the one man she had ever wanted, she preferred no make-shifts. Denied the one close relationship that would have made the cultivation of others seem worth while to her, she had chosen to withdraw into her brain, as it were, concentrate on mental activities, make of herself a creature of thought and action, submerge feeling. She had had enough of feeling and its ravages.

Other women, disappointed as she had been, often find consolation in substituting quantity for quality, building up about themselves a fortress of many

friends, forming many relationships of varying sorts and of varying satisfaction in place of the one perfect one. Not so with Cicely. A cold woman, people called her. Beautiful, brilliant, with a brain that had but to be touched to respond, but with feelings scarcely ever aroused.

But to-night Cicely's feelings had been aroused. Something tender and unfamiliarly maternal had stolen over her as she had sat on the couch beside Sheilah, and held her hand. Sheilah on her part had felt something tender for Cicely. A little of that nearly forgotten, young-girl infatuation for Cicely had swept over Sheilah, as Cicely had risen to say good-bye. Cicely had been aware of it, and she treasured it to-night, as she sped home underneath the stars. Home! Six servants, a German police dog and a wire-haired fox-terrier!

Cicely called up Dr. Sheldon after her solitary dinner that night. The police dog announced him at nine o'clock.

Two days later Sheilah received a letter from Cicely. Her throat ached and her eyes smarted as she read it.

3

It had not been until after Dr. Sheldon had left Cicely Morgan that night that she had asked for her mail. There had been only one letter — a letter,

however, the mere address of which brought the sudden color to her face. She hadn't supposed, after all these years of self-discipline, the sight of her name in the familiar handwriting that had once been so vital to her, would still quicken her pulse.

It was a letter she had been rather expecting — rather dreading, too — ever since Roger Dallinger had surprised several doctors by recovering from a severe illness last spring. A mutual friend kept Cicely informed as to outward events in Roger Dallinger's life. Cicely had been in Paris when the mutual friend had written her that pneumonia had swooped down upon Roger Dallinger, following an operation for appendicitis, and that it wasn't expected he could possibly pull through. She mentioned the hospital where he lay sick. Cicely on a sudden impulse had cabled flowers to be sent.

She regretted it later. Surely her brain must have been asleep to allow any such irrational act to occur. Long ago she had concluded never to stir up the ashes of that buried fire in her heart again. But she had been taken unawares. Because Roger was a year younger than herself (once such a secret thorn to her), and always so well, she had never pictured him as sick or dying. Surely she couldn't let Roger die without a sign or symbol of any sort in memory of all he had once been. Not that he would care. He would be too sick to know, perhaps. But cabling

the flowers had soothed and comforted Cicely — at least until the mutual friend wrote that Roger was recovering. Then it disturbed and filled her with vague alarm.

Cicely leaned back against the pillows of her chaise-longue now, and closed her eyes a moment, before opening Roger's letter. He would not consider the flowers more than a gracious acknowledgment, probably, of an old friendship that had long been asleep. The card that had accompanied them had borne simply her name.

It had been she, thank Heaven, not Roger, who had given that friendship its sleep-potion so many years ago. She had that to remember for her pride's sake. When once she had become convinced that Roger felt little of the compelling force that made life intolerable to her as long as he was within her reach, and yet not *with* her, or at least, in constant communication with her, she had put him beyond her reach.

She recalled now the evening she had told him that she was going to Europe for a year or more, and how, to his light and careless reply, 'But you'll write often, of course,' she had quietly rejoined, 'No, I think we had better not write at all, Roger.'

That had been several months after the memorable Sunday he had spent with her in Wallbridge, when he had so failed to satisfy her. She had been tremu-

lously expecting something that day (which he had given her reason to expect) and he had squandered the precious moments in admiration of a little girl he saw in church. And she had shown her disappointment. She had been so impatiently hungry that day for *all* of Roger, that she would have been jealous of a dog, or a flower that had power to divert his attention from her. That was the way she had cared for him — the primitive, untrained, unproud, unqueenlike way she had cared for Roger Dallinger!

Well — let her not rehearse it. It always left her feeling so stripped and shorn! Anyhow, she had not acted in a primitive, untrained way. She had not pursued Roger.

At the end of her first year abroad she had met him at a dinner party in Boston, soon after her return, and he had gaily (he was always so gay), inquired if he might not run up to Wallbridge soon, and welcome her home personally.

She, looking back into his laughing eyes (if only in their brown depths she had discovered a little anxiety as to her answer), had replied as lightly as he, 'I'm rather busy, Roger. I'm starting for California in a week.'

And he hadn't urged!

Oh, why hadn't he urged?

Cicely shrugged now and sighed, as she gazed at the unopened letter in her hand. Then sitting up,

shoving herself back against her rich soft pile of silk pillows, broke open the envelope.

The letter began just as his letters used to begin, 'Cicely,' — as if he were speaking to her — and continued just as they used to continue, in the old, half-playful, half-serious vein that always so oddly pleased and piqued her. Subtle and simple both at once. Sophisticated and naïve all on one page. Such a mixture of boy and man! She smiled fondly. 'So awfully nice of you' — a girl's expression, followed by the conventional, man-of-the-world bromidism, 'Grant me the honor of thanking you in person,' and then for playfulness, 'Haven't you punished me long enough?' And for seriousness, 'Let me come and see you in the fall when I shall be quite fit again. I want to very much.' And then abruptly — his name — just one name, 'Roger,' the R kicking out its leg straight, like a small boy marching, just the way it used to.

Well, why not? After all these years, why not let him come and see her in the fall? Hadn't she punished herself long enough, too? And perhaps learned her lesson now? Not to require too much. To expect nothing, hope for nothing. To be satisfied with what he had to give.

Roger had never married. They might still become the best of friends. Their conversation had never lacked salt. Their relationship (but for the

bitterness of disappointment in her own heart), had been perfectly seasoned for enjoyment. Similar points of view, dissimilar personal opinions.

Cicely sat a long while before her dressing-table that night after she had let down her hair. Roger used to say he loved her hair — lightly, of course, much in the same way he said he loved sunsets, spring, and chocolate-creams. But she had deceived herself into believing he had loved it as a man loves every pleasing detail in the woman he desires.

Sometimes he used to touch her hair, gently, just the surface of it, with the palms of his hands as if it was made of cloud, and once he had said, 'It is like a soft, dark summer night.'

How she had treasured that simile (he was so full of similes) and hugged it to her heart. Her hair had been the one thing about her that Roger had admired most, and it was the one thing that had changed most. Cicely's hair was no longer like a soft, dark summer night. It had become as white and brilliant as an Arctic noon. Oh, how she hated her white hair!

4

The first thing Cicely did the next morning, after she had drunk her black coffee and eaten her one piece of dry toast, was to reach under her pillow for Roger's letter and read it again. The letter had sent

her to sleep the night before with a trace of a smile on her lips. There was the same reaction in the morning. She arose with a pleasant word for her maid, and a special greeting for each of the servants. Such had always been the effect upon Cicely of a sign or signal of any sort from Roger — magic, immediate, warming and softening her through and through, bringing out her loveliest and best.

She wrote to Sheilah when she was still under the spell of Roger's letter. Before ever reading his letter she had made up her mind to help Sheilah. But it was the indefinite sense of sudden joy in her heart, occasioned by the possibility of seeing Roger Dallinger again, that lent wings to her pen, as she wrote Sheilah, offering her gift, not as one bestowing, but as one pleading, as one in sore need of a human being just such as Sheilah — bound to her by tie of blood and family — with whom to share a little of her over-amount of prosperity. Cicely suggested camps for the two older children, a farm near Wallbridge for Phillip, and for her — for Sheilah herself, eight long, quiet, uninterrupted weeks alone in a charming hotel she knew about on the side of a mountain in New Hampshire.

Roger's letter was accountable for bringing to Cicely's mind the particular charming hotel. Cicely and Dr. Sheldon had discussed various retreats for Sheilah, but it wasn't until after Cicely read Roger's

letter in the morning that she suddenly recalled 'Avidon's on Pine Mountain.' One of Roger's undestroyed letters had been written to her from Avidon's, when he was visiting his mother who was spending a summer there recuperating from an illness.

It wasn't a sanitarium, nor health resort, but there was a doctor — a very great and wise man, who lived in a log-cabin of rather glorified proportions, within horseback distance of the hotel. This doctor, usually dressed in khaki knickerbockers and soft shirts with the collar open, was in the habit of riding over to the hotel occasionally to share a little of his greatness and wisdom with certain of the guests there, some of whom had traveled a continent for the privilege. It was just the right place for Sheilah. Expensive. Of course Sheilah would have to have clothes — proper equipment. Cicely would see to that. If only there was a vacancy!

She called up Avidon's on the long-distance telephone. There *was* a vacancy! Or would be in ten days. A single room and bath overlooking the valley. Cicely engaged it.

CHAPTER IV

I

SHEILAH didn't tell Felix about Cicely's letter for two days. They had just finished the supper dishes. Felix always helped her with the supper dishes now. She preferred his help to Laetitia's. His clumsiness was so much more gentle.

The children had all gone out for an hour of the cool evening air. Felix was sitting at his carpenter's bench, Sheilah lying on the couch near by, as usual now. Felix was working on a baby-grand piano, staining it a mahogany red. He laid it down, before Sheilah had spoken many words, wiped his hands on a bit of waste near by, and listened with a stillness and concentration that disquieted Sheilah a little.

'Of course, I don't have to go, Felix,' she said to break the silence that followed her story. 'I don't really want to go. It seems too much trouble to get ready, but Cicely doesn't intend to send Laetitia and Roddie to camps unless I do, nor Phillip to the farm, and it would be so wonderful for them!'

'Of course,' murmured Felix, his eyes upon his idle hands.

'Laetitia and Roddie would be with such fine companions. They've never had a taste of the woods.

Laetitia has never been anywhere, but once to Detroit to visit Gretchen, and Gretchen has asked her again for this summer. You know I don't like Gretchen's influence on Laetitia. And Roddie — I think if Roddie could be under the influence of camp standards for a while — clean play in sport, honesty in all things, it might make a difference to him all his life.'

'Of course,' murmured Felix again.

'And Cicely has thought of you, too, Felix,' Sheilah went on, 'she suggests I arrange with the little negro girl I told her about — Pansy, you know — to come oftener and look out for you.'

'I don't need Pansy.'

'Don't you want me to go, Felix?'

'Of course I do. It's only ——' He stopped.

'It's only what, Felix?'

'It's only it shows how much I amount to — not to be able to do it for you myself,' he brought out finally, through lips that scarcely moved.

'You've always done everything you could for me, Felix.'

'Nevin Baldwin could have done more, I guess,' he murmured.

'Nobody could have done more than their best, could they?' Sheilah inquired with her kindest smile.

But Felix didn't see the smile. He didn't even look up. He fell to shredding the piece of waste into

tiny bits, as he went on speaking — half to himself, half as if to the waste.

‘The doctor told me how important the vacation was. I knew. I asked for a raise. But they said they were letting help go. I tried. But it was no use. It didn’t work. Nothing much I try to do ever does work.’

2

Later, after the children were in bed and asleep, and Sheilah’s room dark and still, Felix got up from his couch in the dining-room, groped his way to the china closet (converted into a coat closet) and took down from a back hook, an old brown overcoat which had once belonged to Gretchen’s husband. It was a lined overcoat, rather heavy for summer, but it was light in color, and Felix had used it for a raincoat ever since Gretchen had sent it on.

He carried the overcoat into the kitchen, stepping softly in his bare feet across the floor, carefully avoiding the threshold, which always squeaked. After closing the kitchen door he leaned and turned the key noiselessly, then pulled down both the window-shades and turned on a light.

Sheilah kept her small kitchen utensils in a drawer beside the sink. Felix opened the drawer and took out a sharp-pointed vegetable-knife. Then sat down by the kitchen table, shoved one hand into a

pocket of the overcoat, turned it inside out, raised his head, listened a moment, and proceeded to apply the sharp point of the vegetable-knife to a row of coarse black linen stitches. When he had ripped a slot big enough for his hand he pushed it down deep between the coat and its lining, and pulled out a folded paper from the far lower corner.

He had hidden the paper there a week ago and sewed the pocket up afterward. But now there was no more necessity to hide the paper. There was no more necessity to keep the paper. He could give it back to Mr. Fairchild now, and explain just how it happened. An accident, pure and simple. He hadn't stolen the paper.

3

It had happened that the very week after the doctor had talked to Felix about Sheilah, and the very day after Felix had tremblingly asked for a raise in his salary, and been refused, Mr. Fairchild, his employer, went down to the bank to cut coupons, and took Felix with him. They were closeted in a small sealed cell, underground, for an hour or more.

Mr. Fairchild was not a very systematic man. He was always misplacing his pencil, or pen, or glasses. His safe-deposit box bulged with disorder. On the particular morning he had asked Felix to accompany him to the bank, Mr. Fairchild had torn off his cou-

pons very hastily. And though he did wait until a bank employee had shoved the long, narrow tin casket safely back into its steel pocket, he rushed off ten or fifteen minutes before Felix left the vault, with instructions to Felix to fill in the customary forms in ink, and deposit the coupons to his account in another bank, farther downtown. He had a rough copy of the coupons, which he had tucked into his waistcoat pocket along with his pencil. It occurred to Felix that Mr. Fairchild would as likely as not misplace the paper before morning.

But it did not occur to Felix to fail to deposit the coupons, immediately, and with scrupulous accuracy. But before depositing them something happened that made the blood pump hard around Felix's heart as he wove his way from one bank to the other through the midday crowds.

It was a rainy day, and raw for June. Felix had worn the light brown overcoat. When he and Mr. Fairchild had been shown into the little sealed room underneath the sidewalk, Felix had taken off his overcoat, and laid it across one end of the glass-covered table. He was alone in the little sealed room when he put on his overcoat.

As he slipped one hand into an open armhole, and swung the coat up on to his shoulder, something dropped on the floor. Something that had been lying on the table underneath the coat. A

piece of paper. A stiff piece of paper. It made a sharp, shrill click that echoed. Felix leaned and picked the paper up. It was a bond! A thousand-dollar City of Charlestown bond!

There had been ten City of Charlestown bonds. Mr. Fairchild had cut the coupons from all ten. Felix had just recounted them and listed them in ink. Evidently one of the bonds had gotten shoved out of sight on the slippery surface of the table, and Mr. Fairchild had carelessly returned only nine to the tin box.

Felix stood contemplating the paper in his hand with slow and sluggish comprehension. He would give it to a bank official as he went out. No. Better return it directly to Mr. Fairchild. But Mr. Fairchild had said that he was not returning to his office until the next morning. Well, he wouldn't miss the bond before morning. More than likely, he would never miss it, or, if he did, he would lay its disappearance to his own carelessness (of which he was quite aware, and quite ashamed, too), and in self-protection say nothing of it. He had once told Felix not to mention to Miss Ward, his secretary, the fact that he had misplaced an envelope in which there was two hundred and fifty dollars that she had just cashed for him for a business trip. The envelope had been found in the scrap-basket later by an office boy.

To Mr. Fairchild two hundred and fifty dollars

wasn't enough to bother about. Nor, it suddenly dawned upon Felix, was a thousand either, for that matter. The loss of either amount wouldn't make Mr. Fairchild suffer, nor anybody he cared about. While to Felix, while to the person Felix cared most about in the world, it would mean —— He drew in his breath sharply and looked at the paper with new and sudden interest.

He had left Sheilah in bed that morning. In his mind's eye he could see her now — lying on her side, listless and unresponsive, one bare arm extending beyond the edge of the bed, and her hand hanging down limp.

Quickly Felix raised his eyes and looked at the closed door, swiftly his glance darted from corner to corner of the sealed cage like a frightened bird, then sought the roof — made of round disks of glass set in metal, across which now hurried hundreds of tramping feet, careless and unconcerned.

It wasn't so much to make sure that he was alone and unwatched that made Felix search the little room with frightened eyes, as it was a wish to escape the sudden opportunity thrust before him. He didn't want to take the bond. Since his marriage he had never been anything but honest in his various positions. But he had a sneaking feeling that it was because he was afraid of being anything else. He had seen other young men (other young men whom

Sheilah had referred to as examples for him to follow) win positions of responsibility by running risks with honesty, as he had seen other boys, in his school and college days, cheat without discovery and shame. The doctor had said —— Quickly Felix shoved the bond into the deep side pocket of his overcoat.

4

For days afterward Felix searched for a plausible explanation to give Sheilah for his sudden acquisition of wealth. Sheilah had always been the family treasurer. Felix could make no deposits at the bank where they kept their savings, or draw out any checks without her knowledge. Nor could he tell her his pay had been raised. He always passed over his pay envelope to Sheilah unbroken. Nor that he had borrowed the money. She despised borrowing. She would insist that he send it back.

Felix was sole custodian of but one source of income. The money he made on his miniature furniture was his alone, to save or spend as was his whim. But it was so little. Of course there was the 'chef-d'œuvre.' It occurred to Felix to tell Sheilah that the doll-house had finally been sold at an excessive figure. But what if she should wander into the toy-shop in town some day, where his things were exhibited, as she did occasionally, and discover it still there? Felix had sewn the bond into the lin-

ing of the overcoat to keep it safe, till he could think of an explanation.

For a week he had thought of little else. Night after night it had kept him awake for hours and hours. Well — it needn't any more! He could go to bed and to sleep now. He would leave the bond in its deep hiding-place till morning and then slip it hastily into his bag, when Sheilah wasn't looking (she always lay down now right after breakfast) and give it back to Mr. Fairchild as soon as he reached the office.

With a sigh of relief he got up, put out the light, and stole softly back into the dining-room, hung up the overcoat on its back hook, and crawled between the covers on the couch.

Just when would he return the bond? Just how? He seldom saw Mr. Fairchild alone. Would he ask if he might see him alone? And once alone, how would it be best to begin? How would he explain to Mr. Fairchild the fact that he had kept the bond so long without mentioning it? Mr. Fairchild had often said that the moment his faith in an employee's honesty was disturbed, however small the offense, he dismissed him immediately, as a fairer arrangement for all concerned. Wouldn't giving back the bond be likely to disturb Mr. Fairchild's faith in Felix's absolute honesty? He mustn't run the risk of losing his position, now, of all times.

Couldn't he perhaps drop the bond in the back of a drawer of Mr. Fairchild's desk, and let him run across it himself some day? Or possibly mail it to him in a government envelope and a typewritten address? No! Either would arouse investigation sooner or later. He alone had been with Mr. Fairchild that day at the bank. He would be sure to be questioned. He wasn't clever at deceit.

Felix didn't sleep much that night after all.

CHAPTER V

I

SHEILAH lay on the crest of a hill and gazed up at the sky. There were great banks of soft white clouds in the sky. It seemed almost as if she could touch them, if she reached up, they were so near. Much nearer than the banks of feathery treetops far below — clouds, too, gray-green, slowly rising. She lay among the blue and yellow flames of August asters, flat on her back, arms outstretched, face turned upward to the sky, on a bed of short tufted grass, soft and springy, like curled hair. She didn't know a bed could be so soft and yet so firm. Like certain hands she had known once long ago — Dr. Sheldon's hands. Or certain arms — her father's, that terrible night when he had held her from flying to pieces.

Dr. Baird had ridden over from his cabin to see Sheilah two days after she had arrived at Avidon's. He had ridden over to see Sheilah every day for the first week. Now Sheilah traveled herself, and on foot, the two miles and a half of lumber-road that lay between Avidon's and the glorified log-cabin in the woods, for a draft of the wisdom distilled there. The effect of Dr. Baird's clear, simple, unmysterious explanation of the various vagaries of Sheilah's tired

nerves, had acted upon them like daylight on bugaboos and ghosts. Dr. Baird, unlike Dr. Evarts, believed in taking a patient into his confidence. Gradually Sheilah's disagreeable sensations were sneaking away, one by one. She was ever so much better.

Lying now on her hilltop (*her* hilltop because she sought it so often), Sheilah rejoiced in the consciousness of being better, as another might rejoice in the consciousness of physical perfection. How good to lie upon a hilltop, day after day, and feel strength running back through one's finger-tips instead of out of them. It was one of her secret delights to imagine that the hill was holding her up, like some kind friend, as far as it could reach toward the healing qualities of sun and sky and wind. And at the same time giving to her of its own healing qualities.

Now, burrowing her finger-tips down through the thick, tufted grass till they found the cool, coarse soil, she fancied that she was drinking of the hill's strength, through her fingers, as the hardy little asters surrounding her drank through their roots, or the sturdy junipers, or the two rugged pines that stood like guards above her bed. At certain moments Sheilah's rejoicing amounted almost to intoxication. Dear kind hill — dear, strong, kind hill that would not let her fall! 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord.' That was the way David

had felt about hills. Sheilah would have sung, 'I will throw down my body onto the hills from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the sod,' which after all was the Lord or, anyhow, a part of Him. How good it was to feel the Lord physically beneath one!

'I'd love to write a psalm!' she suddenly exclaimed out loud.

She was not alone this afternoon. A man in greenish-brown tweeds, the color of the tufted grass, sat against one of the pines.

'What sort of a psalm would you write?'

'Terribly pagan, I'm afraid,' sighed Sheilah, and she patted the rough, curly grass beside her.

The man observed her with an amused smile.

'Nice old dog, isn't he?'

'Lovely old dog!' Sheilah agreed, and turning, burying her nose in the thick grass, drew in a deep breath.

'Smell good after his bath?' laughed the man. It had rained the night before.

'Perfectly delicious,' Sheilah laughed back, and turning her face to the sky again she closed her eyes, and the bit of conversation as light and trivial as the bit of feathered milkweed seed that floated at that moment up over the top of the hill and disappeared into space, so likewise drifted unpursued into silence.

2

A silence in which Sheilah gave herself utterly to the sky, and sun, and the sound of the wind in the two pine trees. Sheilah loved the sound of the wind in the pine trees. So did the man at the foot of them she had discovered.

'Like waves washing on a shore a long way off,' he had remarked lightly the first time he had listened to them with Sheilah.

'Or flames in an open grate,' shyly Sheilah had replied.

'Or the swish of skirts,' the man had suggested the next day.

Sheilah, grown more courageous by then, had added, gazing up at the scudding white billows above, 'The swish of the cloud's skirts.'

The man, his eyes following her skyward gaze, had finished, 'The cloud's skirts, brushing against the blue tiles of the sky.'

'Are you a poet?' Sheilah asked.

'Are you a poetess?' the man replied, and then confessed he had cribbed the 'blue tiles of the sky' from Amy Lowell.

3

Building similes of this sort, collaborating in fantastic metaphors, had become an almost daily pastime between these two. Harmless and diverting.

Sheilah was amazed at herself. Once she had been skillful at conversation, but it was so long ago, and for such a little while. Once, too, she had read Amy Lowell, and other modern poets (modern now no more), but she had had no time to keep up with books; nor money, nor inspiration. She hadn't talked to any gentleman (except a doctor about children's diseases, or a real-estate broker about rents, or a bond salesman about a better investment for the little property her mother had left her) since she left Wallbridge.

She thought she had forgotten how to talk about anything else. But how easily it came back! How easily wearing lovely clothes came back, too, and the confidence of manner that accompanies them. Like swimming, she supposed. One doesn't forget how — ever. Only there must be water, of course. And here at Avidon's there was water for Sheilah. Everybody had been so kind to her! Not only this man (though he had been kind first, and was still the most kind), but every one in the little group ('The Outsiders,' they called themselves), into which he had introduced her.

This man had been kind to her because of Dr. Baird. He was a personal friend of Dr. Baird's. He had been introduced by Dr. Baird, and, Sheilah suspected, had been instructed to see to it that she had a good time at Avidon's. Sheilah had been instructed

by Dr. Baird to accept all friendly advances made to her half-way. More than half-way. To make friendly advances herself. In fact, it was by such coöperation, Dr. Baird told her, that her cure (her self-cure — for it must be self-cure) could be most speedily accomplished.

Moreover, Dr. Baird had instructed her to confide her personal affairs in no one. It was one of Dr. Baird's rules that his patients refrain from discussing their difficulties with each other — or with any of the guests at the hotel. Sheilah had complied. Her corner room with private balcony and bath, overlooking the purple shadows of the valley, was not in keeping with her working-woman's hands, cracked and scarred, bearing traces of vegetable-knives and recent contact with dish-water. But according to Dr. Baird's orders she persistently applied glycerine and rose-water every night, and made no explanations.

She raised her hands now against the clouds, and gazed at them smiling. Not only was she better inside, not only was her soul slowly healing, but her hands — her hands too!

4

And she had been at Avidon's scarcely three weeks! Perhaps it was all a dream, from which she would wake up pretty soon. And the billowy clouds

above would prove to be the familiar mounds of the weekly 'wash,' waiting to be sprinkled, piled high in the clothes-basket on the kitchen table; the hill beneath her, her own bed that squeaked when she turned; the sweet smell of the damp ground, the scented powder Laetitia used lately; and the swish of the cloud's skirts, Felix at his work-bench in the dining-room.

Suddenly she said out loud,

'I've thought of something else the pine is like.'

'What?'

'A buzz-saw through a closed door.'

'What do *you* know about buzz-saws?'

She didn't tell him. Strange to share so many fancies with a man, and so few facts. She had scarcely more than mentioned Felix and the three children to him. He knew that she lived outside Boston somewhere, and used to live in Wallbridge before she was married, but little more.

She had met him the second night after she arrived at Avidon's. She had finished dinner early and was sitting alone on the hotel verandah in the late sunshine, keenly aware of the unfamiliar peace about her, and the still sweet coolness of the air. As if, she thought, she'd suddenly stepped inside a big empty church from off a hot, crowded side-walk. Dr. Baird had remained for dinner that night. He had

seen Sheilah for the first time in the afternoon. They had talked for nearly two hours.

Sheilah had felt a strange new sense of courage stirring in her as she sat on the hotel verandah, and recalled some of the things Dr. Baird had just said — a stirring as thrilling as the first vague indefinite motion of a very much wanted child. Suddenly, one of those unaccountable moments of elation had taken possession of Sheilah, that used to, years ago. For an instant she was inexplicably happy and hopeful. She was going to get well! The black veil of despair was going to lift! Roddie was not going to grow up to be a cheat. Laetitia was not going to grow up to be like Gretchen. She herself was not going to lose her love for Felix. Everything was going to come out all right! She leaned forward, and looking up, smiled into a bright shaft of sunlight, piercing the sunset clouds, and falling on her chair.

5

A few feet away, inside a plate-glass window, a man had been watching Sheilah, vaguely interested, puzzled, annoyed finally.

‘I think I know that woman out there, Carl,’ later he said to his old friend and college classmate, Carl Baird, now become so great and wise, ‘but I can’t seem to place her. Who is she, anyway?’

‘Nawn is her name — Mrs. Felix Nawn.’

'Means nothing to me.'

'Come and meet her, and help make it pleasant for her here, if you can. She's a patient of mine.'

Dr. Baird had left them almost as soon as he had introduced them. Sheilah without warning or preparation suddenly found herself alone with a stranger (she, who lately avoided meeting even the postman, it was such an effort to say good-morning) politely inquiring, 'May I sit here?' drawing the chair next to hers into a better position for conversation.

'Yes. Do.' Sheilah replied. What else *could* she reply. 'Only,' she added, half-rising, 'hadn't we better move out of the sun?'

'No, don't. Please, I beg of you. Don't move.'

The stranger was very insistent. He even put out his hand as if to push her back bodily into her chair.

'Oh, all right,' she acquiesced, and sank back again into the bright shaft of sunlight.

The stranger drew his chair away from Sheilah a little and sat down. He was an older man, at least what Sheilah then called an 'older man,' ten years or so older than herself. Dark, clean-shaven, ruddy.

'Are you an inmate?' he inquired smiling.

'An inmate?' Sheilah exclaimed. '*Is* that what I am?'

'Certainly,' he shrugged, apparently enjoying her dismay, 'if you're a patient of Carl Baird's.' Where

had he seen her before? 'The others are just plain ordinary hotel guests.' Where had he been where he could see her? 'The inmates are much nicer.' Sitting in a shaft of sunlight like that, looking up, smiling the way she had a moment before. 'The guests are horribly envious,' he went on. There had been sun-motes in the other shaft of sunlight, floating about her hair. 'There are usually several celebrities among the inmates.' Glorious hair, as he recalled it. Gold. Thousands of little glistening spirals escaping. 'I hope *you're* not a celebrity.'

'I'm not!' she assured him quickly.

But he didn't remember that glint of silver in her hair. 'Well, I'm glad of that.' And how very tired she looked to-day! 'I don't feel comfortable with lady celebrities.' Oh, she probably was just *like* somebody. But whom? Bother his memory, anyway. Reaching into an inside pocket he drew out a cigarette case — an old, silver, engraved affair, worn smooth like an old ten-cent piece. 'Do you mind?'

Sheilah shook her head. 'No. Do.'

'Will *you?*' and he offered *her* the open case. If they both smoked he could study her more closely, gaze without apparent impoliteness.

But again Sheilah shook her head. 'No, thanks,' she said. But it was rather nice being back among the little commonplace elegancies. She looked up and smiled again into the shaft of sunlight.

'Wait a minute!' suddenly the man opposite her exclaimed. 'By the way! Excuse me! I've got it!' And he tossed away the lighted match, half-way to his mouth, and laid down the unlighted cigarette on the piazza railing. 'It's a window!'

'What's a window?'

'There's a window in a church in Boston,' he went on, still looking at her intently, still groping his way. 'A stained-glass window, that you make me think of a little. I thought at first I'd met you somewhere, but I guess it's just a resemblance. It's a memorial window to a young girl. She's in a church, looking up — at least I *think* she's in the church, though — By the way,' abruptly he broke off. 'Perhaps *you* were in the church. Pardon me, but did you ever live in Wallbridge, Massachusetts?'

'A thousand years ago.'

The man leaned forward in his chair eagerly.

'Your first name couldn't be Sheilah, could it?'

'Who are you?' Sheilah exclaimed.

'Your name used to be Sheilah Miller,' he announced triumphantly.

Sheilah stared, open-eyed and dazed. 'I suppose I ought to know *you*,' she floundered, 'but I didn't even listen when Dr. Baird introduced you. I don't even know your name.'

'Dallinger. Roger Dallinger.'

She repeated it. 'I'm afraid it doesn't help me very much.' And yet Dallinger — Roger Dallinger — it had a vaguely familiar sound. If she had read the papers, as she should, she would no doubt know who he was. 'Probably *you're* the celebrity,' she said.

'Oh, no, I'm not.'

She made a helpless shrug. 'Well, won't you help me a little and tell me why I ought to know you?'

'You oughtn't to. You never saw me before. But I've seen *you*. *I've* every reason in the world for remembering *you*. The whole course of my life was changed by *you*.' His eyes (dark eyes, framed dark, that is) were sparkling beneath their charcoal arches, as if he very much enjoyed the situation. And he did enjoy it. There was a streak of boyish fun in him that he had never outgrown, never would. The expression of amazement in Sheilah's face was too delicious to resist. He would amaze her still more. 'Why, I suppose,' he went on gleefully, impulsively (he had never outgrown impulsiveness, either), 'I'd be a settled married man with grown-up children by this time but for you.'

Did older men talk like that nowadays? Of course boys used to, years ago. They called it 'a line.' Sheilah remembered perfectly this particular kind of line. Hyperbole. Extravagant exaggeration. She

remembered too how she used to respond to it. Calmly, unperturbed. So now, leaning back in her chair, she replied serenely, 'You needn't think I'm going to appear curious.'

'And *you* needn't think I'm going to satisfy a repressed instinct, if curiosity *is* an instinct. Is it? You'll know and can tell me after you've been here a week, and studied psychology under Carl Baird. Hello, Jake. Hello, Persis,' he exclaimed, addressing a man and woman strolling toward them. 'Come here, I want you to meet Mrs. Nawn. Mrs. Palmer, Mr. Palmer. Mrs. Nawn is an old acquaintance of mine,' he added, with a special twinkle in his eyes for Sheilah alone.

A moment later two other couples joined them, and again Sheilah, with the special twinkle, was introduced as an 'old acquaintance of mine.'

'Where did you know each other?' inquired one of the women of Roger Dallinger.

'Oh, that's telling, Judith,' he replied with a great air of mystery.

'Oh, excuse me,' said Judith — Judith Lorimer. The Lorimers were from outside Philadelphia. There were also Mr. and Mrs. Sterling, from outside Chicago. 'All Outsiders, you see,' Mr. Dallinger had explained to Sheilah with a smile. The Palmers were from outside New York.

For a minute Sheilah felt shy and ill at ease. The

women were so perfectly dressed. But only for a minute, for she soon became aware of her own dress, perfect also, gray chiffon-cloth, untrimmed, undecorated, with gray shoes to match. How wonderful of Cicely to have foreseen, and to have provided! How easy to assume the old poise again, inside the protecting armor of a lovely gown. Her heart was fluttering, but she bowed, quietly acknowledging the introductions, one after another, with her old grace and charm.

The 'Outsiders' (for it appeared these four couples completed the select group) accepted her almost immediately as one of them. Not only, as she imagined, because Mr. Dallinger had introduced her 'as an old acquaintance,' but because they recognized her as one of their kind.

The next day, when she told them that she came from outside Boston, Mr. Palmer had exclaimed, 'Good! another recruit for the Outsiders! Will you join us?'

And the very first night, scarcely ten minutes after her introduction, they had asked her to dance, to play bridge. She had begged off. What would they think of her hands? 'And I really haven't done either for years,' frankly she had confessed. So instead they had all gone to the moving-pictures in the casino, and afterward to the grill.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when Sheilah, who for

three months had been to bed by nine o'clock, and felt too tired even to hear Roddie's and Phil's prayers, escaped to her room, feeling suddenly rather weak in the knees.

CHAPTER VI

I

THERE had been of course a few embarrassing moments when, according to the nature of human beings, Sheilah's new acquaintances attempted to discover mutual friends in or about the city in which she lived. But they were too well bred to pursue their search, after several failures at establishing any such contacts. Nor, mercifully, did they insist upon locating her street and number. They soon learned, that like many of Dr. Baird's patients, Mrs. Nawn was inclined to be noncommittal about her present life, and they avoided asking questions.

But certain facts about her early career cropped out. For instance, she and Judith Lorimer discovered one day that they had graduated from the same school in Connecticut. It would have been a source of satisfaction to Sheilah's mother to have seen her insistence upon a boarding-school for Sheilah of the 'select' variety bearing fruit at such late date. Judith Lorimer had attended the school a year after Sheilah had left it, but she had heard of 'Sheilah Miller from Wallbridge.'

'From Wallbridge?' Persis Palmer had caught at that. 'Are you from Wallbridge? I once knew such

a nice boy from there. He was killed in the war. His name was Nevin Baldwin.'

Yes, Sheilah had known Nevin Baldwin. She had been to his Junior Prom with him.

A few such establishing facts helped Sheilah enormously to play her rôle with confidence. Was it a rôle? Or was her life with Felix a rôle? And had she returned for a little while to be the *real* Sheilah? She felt so at ease. Especially with Roger Dallinger.

She glanced at him now, surreptitiously, from beneath half-closed lids, contemplating him and their intimacy, lightly, dreamily, suppressing a shrug as she told herself there was nothing flattering in his attentions. He was just a very kind-hearted man, whom it amused to assume a sort of big-brother responsibility for a lonely woman's entertainment in a strange place; and for whom she was a convenient companion for the daily walk prescribed for him, also. For it appeared that Mr. Dallinger had come to Avidon's for its healing qualities, too. He had had an operation last spring, followed by pneumonia. One lung, lightly one day he had told Sheilah, had needed toning up.

To look at him one wouldn't think anything needed toning up. He was as rugged in appearance as the pine tree he leaned against; as physically sound, it flashed over Sheilah gazing at him, as

a perfectly ripened piece of fruit, browned and weathered by sun and wind, firm and solid to the core. Just the sight of him had an invigorating effect on her.

His hands were clasped now about his knees as he sat upon the ground, head thrown back against the trunk of the pine, gazing up into its needles. He was dark, very dark. His eyebrows were like the outspread wings of a black raven, and there was always that dark, violet bloom on his close-shaven cheeks, with a deep red glow underneath. Like red wine glowing in old bottles when you hold them up to the light, thought Sheilah. How surprised he'd be, if he knew she was making similes about him!

How surprised she'd be, if she knew he was making similes about her!

2

She had tossed aside her hat. The sun was shining on her hair. He had seen gold-brown meadows in the fall, silvered with frost, shine like that in the early morning. Strange to find beauty in the silver in a woman's hair! To discover in the wake of her disappearing youth, loveliness and charm!

He had always taken it for granted that freshness, vivid coloring, firm, white, solid flesh appealed to him most, but to his surprise he discovered he was delighted by *this* woman's blent tones and faded color-

ing, as a connoisseur in art is delighted, he supposed, by the blent tones and faded coloring of a lovely old piece of brocade. Even her physical weariness, her inability to walk very far without frequent rests; the way she had, sometimes, when sitting on the hotel verandah in her rocking-chair, unaware of observation, of closing her eyes, and letting her hands hang limp and lifeless, appealed to him in some strange way. A flower drooping — a sailboat beached — a child tired.

Amazing, that her languishing loveliness should so stir his imagination! Well, she mustn't guess it. She was so sure his interest was purely impersonal, indulged in carelessly, without reserve, because so safe. She trusted him implicitly. Well, he trusted himself, didn't he? He wasn't a boy, nor a young man, either, any more. She wasn't a girl. Thirty-five — thirty-eight — older, perhaps. He wasn't good at ages. Married. Three children. And the sort of married woman to whom, he felt sure, it would not be happiness, but only shock and pain, to be tempted from out of the path of her ideals for even a harmless *détour*, however steep and difficult that path proved to be.

Was it steep and difficult? She had told so few facts about herself. What sort of a home had she? What sort of a life did she lead there? Gardened a good deal, he guessed, to judge from her hands when

she first came. So many of Carl's patients gardened as a cure. Dressed very well. Not too much variety. She must be fairly well fixed financially. The corner suites with private balcony at Avidon's were occupied only by those who could afford luxuries. Nawn? Felix Nawn? Roger had never heard the man's name mentioned in financial circles. What sort of a fellow was he? Was she happy with him? Many of Carl's patients were victims of domestic incompatibilities of one sort and another. Useless, of course, to question Carl. Useless, too, to question *her*. She wouldn't even tell him where she lived. In a spirit of playful retaliation she had assumed an air of mystery about herself from the first, to pay him back, she said, for his refusal to satisfy her curiosity as to when and where he had seen her before, and in what way she had ever influenced an act of his.

Why had he ever told her that? Foolish, headlong impulse. It hampered him. It would be conceited and caddish to reveal the name of a woman who had once been jealous of him, even if the woman herself had forgotten all about the long-buried episode, as doubtless Cicely had. It had been years since he had seen Cicely Morgan. Nice of her to have sent him those flowers last spring when he had been in the hospital. He would run up to Wallbridge and thank her in person in the fall. He had written her to that

effect. What would she be like now? He wished he could ask Sheilah if she had ever known Cicely Morgan. But it might lead to an explanation.

Strange Cicely had never married. Strange he had never married himself. He had so positively intended to once. It might have worked. It might, anyway, have been better than living alone all these years. Children, home, roots. As it was, simply friends, companions, good-fellowship. Wanted everywhere. Indispensable nowhere. Surprising he'd never met any one since Cicely whom he'd wanted to marry. He had thought he would. He had hoped he would. He had never met any one who had even stirred his imagination until — until ——

3

Roger glanced at Sheilah. Her hand, upturned, lay across her eyes, closed now, the fingers curled like the petals of a lotus-flower. She was asleep perhaps. Once before she had fallen asleep beside him like that, her eyes hidden from him, as if she were shy of letting him see them closed. He closed his own, sharing her darkness.

Finally in a low tone, 'Asleep?' he inquired.

'Of course not!' instantly and indignantly she assured him.

'I've thought of something else the pine sounds like,' he remarked from behind closed lids.

'What?'

'A certain woman's name.'

'Whose?'

'Can't you guess?'

'Not possibly.'

'Well, listen,' and gently he repeated Sheilah three times — more gently than he realized.

She turned and stared at him. There he sat against the tree, eyes closed, chin uplifted, like a magician, under some strange hypnotic spell. He became aware of the silence, and opened his eyes, meeting hers, brimming with suspicion.

'What's the matter?' he inquired in the innocent, injured tone of a child surprised. 'Don't you like my simile? I thought it such a pat one, and much more poetical than a buzz-saw.' He spoke flippantly now, forcing his eyes to sparkle with fun at her; and still further to set her fears at rest, he picked up a pine-cone near by and flung it at her. It hit her grotesquely on the chin. 'Oh, I'm sorry. Forgive me. I'm a brute.'

Instantly she flung the cone back at him. He caught it laughing.

'Do you think,' she inquired a moment later, now entirely reassured. (After all he'd been only teasing. She might have known! He was *always* only teasing.) 'Do you think I should have taken you out of that no-trump bid last night?'

He was immensely relieved. He explained elaborately and at length why she should.

She played a very good game of bridge, but had been a little rusty. He had taught her all the new rules and conventions. The same with dancing. He had taught her all the new rules and conventions of dancing that he knew. She danced exquisitely, with instinctive grace. He loved to dance with her. So did the other 'Outsiders.' So did many of the other guests in the hotel.

Now, Roger, stretching out his arm in front of him, glanced at his wrist watch. 'Time to be moving,' he remarked. 'Five o'clock.' And he got up and strode over to her. 'Come!' he said peremptorily. He often assumed an exaggerated manner of command with her — it was part of the teasing — and usually she responded with an exaggerated manner of docility.

'All right, if you say so, but I hate to go. It's so heavenly!'

'I know,' he agreed, looking away over the rolling clouds of treetops below, toward the far, still horizon. 'Sharing beauty like this is the next best thing to sharing things we can't, isn't it?' he commented quietly, and then quickly, cutting off any possibility of reply, 'Come, we've got to go,' and he stretched out his hand toward Sheilah.

She placed her own in it, and he jerked her to her

feet. For an instant she stood very close to him, the wind blowing her short skirt against his knees. Their eyes were now on the same level. How glossy the raven's wings were! Like charred wood in the sunshine. And how gold were the eyes beneath the wings. Not brown at all as she had thought. But like — like ——

'What are you looking at?' banteringly he inquired.

The boldness of him! Well, *she* could be bold too! 'Sherry.' She retorted instantly. 'What are *you*?'

'Two of the blue tiles of Heaven,' he replied, as instantly. And suddenly they both burst into laughter as if they had been very witty.

It was, you see, nothing but persiflage, playful competition, a harmless combat of the wits.

They swung down the hill, side by side, in great long strides, letting the force of gravity carry them along as if they were rolling stones. They plunged into the woods at the foot of the hill; on the level walking more slowly, he taking the lead, as usual, on the narrow trail that meandered for half a mile through leaf-draped aisles of trees, bordering a tumbling brook, crossing it twice, breaking out with it finally into a meadow, startlingly bright and colorful after the curtained woods.

There was a group of birches at the further end of the meadow where the brook spilled over into a

marsh. Roger stopped to-day and remarked upon the birches.

'They're like young girls in green chiffon in wading,' he said to Sheilah, as he had to Cicely years ago.

Sheilah flashed him one of her brightest smiles and then turned meditatively toward the birches. 'No, not young girls — *little* girls. Their legs are so spindly and straight.'

How different from Cicely! Oh, really she was too good to be true, too absolutely satisfying to be made of flesh and blood. He was possessed with a sudden desire to squeeze her hard, as if she, too, were a little girl, who would squirm and want to get away, and preen herself afterward like a ruffled bird.

4

That night Sheilah dressed three times for dinner. The gray chiffon made her look so pale, the green chiffon made her look so gray. Standing before her mirror, the two discarded dresses cast aside, she gazed at herself critically. Her appearance had not been a matter of great importance to Sheilah since her marriage. She touched her hair, and sighed. It used to be rather nice. At least people used to say so. But it was spoiled now — the gold all gone to silver; the clear, shell-pink of her cheeks to faded bois-de-rose; and when she smiled, fans of tiny

wrinkles instantly spread open at the corners of her eyes. Oh, she would give a great deal to be young and lovely to-night. Only her eyes remained unchanged, retained their same calm, undisturbed blue. What had Roger Dallinger said he had been looking at back there on the hill? 'Two of the blue tiles of Heaven.' The quotation really read, 'The blue tiles of the sky.' What a lovely thing to say! What lovely things he was always saying! She would wear her blue dress to-night. The last time she had worn it, he had remarked, glancing first at her dress and then significantly at her eyes, 'My, what an orgy of blue!'

She went to her closet and took down the blue dress, and slipped it over her shoulders, smiling indulgently at herself as she emerged from its calyx. Sheilah Nawn dressing for a man! Well, what harm? In a few weeks she would be going back into obscurity again. She would be going back to her job.

Dr. Baird had made it so clear that a woman's husband and children were her job — her first responsibility, and that making a success of one's job, one's first responsibility, was simply a matter of learning the rules of efficiency, and being strong-willed enough to apply them. So many hours of rest, of work, of play, equally divided. Calm, persistent control of one's thoughts and acts; calm, persistent ignoring of one's sensations and emotions.

She could hardly wait to go home and test her new knowledge. In the meanwhile — in the brief two weeks and a little more that remained. . . . Was her name like the wind in the pines? What was *his* name like? 'Roger Dallinger, Roger Dallinger?' She spoke it twice out loud. Funny how familiar the name always sounded, never failing to give her that tantalizing feeling of a particular time and place in her past, evading capture. To-night, as she repeated it, the vision of dazzling snow and sunshine flashed before her, and afterward, freakishly, Felix in the schoolroom sunk down under his desk, and herself beside him, covered with chalk-dust, feeling so sorry.

There had been a letter from Felix to-night. He wrote to her faithfully every few days. Slow, labored notes. There wasn't much to write about. But his letter to-night had contained a startling piece of information. He had sold his chef-d'œuvre! He spelled it 'shay durve.' All these years, then, he had never known what it meant. Poor Felix! He had sold the doll-house for two hundred dollars! To a woman in Chicago, who had taken a fancy to it. And he was working hard on a duplicate order for a friend of hers. How happy Felix would be! The sale of a single piece of his furniture would set him to work for days afterward, with renewed energy, inspired by some deep-buried dream of success. And now an order, an actual demand for his wares! His

joy would be a little like that of a poet's at recognition . . . Really the blue dress was rather nice. And now that it was dark enough to draw the shades, and flood the room with artificial light she wasn't so bad after all.

Seven o'clock already! She must hurry. The Outsiders were all dining together to-night, in the grill. It was Judith's birthday. There were to be cocktails in Roger's room at seven-fifteen. Oh, ought she to be having so good a time? The mother of four children? And one of them dead? Ought she to be so happy away from her children? Ought she to be all dressed up in pretty clothes going to a party, when Felix, stoop-shouldered and alone, was seated in his shirt-sleeves at the work-bench in the dining-room, making another 'shay durve?'

CHAPTER VII

I

BUT Felix was not seated at his work-bench in the dining-room. He was not making another doll-house. While Sheilah was dressing for Judith's party, he and the 'shay durve' were making their way out into the country in a truck, Felix seated alone on the front seat, the doll-house concealed beneath a burlap covering in the rear of the car.

Felix had told the keeper of the shop, where for so long the doll-house had awaited a purchaser, that a woman who had seen it a year ago had ordered it directly from him. He would call for it sometime with a car, and crate it to her himself. Luckily the shop-keeper had asked no questions. No suspicions had been aroused so far. But it was scarey business. He didn't like it. He would be glad when this night was over. Every little while he kept looking back at the 'shay durve,' crouching there so submissively under the burlap, waiting its doom.

He wished there had been some other way, but there hadn't. Sheilah must never be able to trace the doll-house, or a single piece of its furniture, to any destination. Lucky she was away. And the children, too. He could never have hired a truck, and be

out till all hours of the morning, if the family had been at home to ask questions. As it was, he had carefully avoided the neighborhood where he lived. No one who knew him, even by sight, must see him lugging the doll-house around. Otherwise he might have taken it to the apartment, dismembered it with a saw and hatchet, and burned it in the kitchen stove, like a dead body one doesn't wish to be found with.

He knew exactly where he was going. He had had the spot picked out for days — an old gravel-pit, on a lonely road, discovered one Saturday afternoon after a long bus-ride and journey on foot. It was the third turn to the right after you left the State road, about half a mile beyond a barn deserted by its house.

He backed the car into the narrow cart-path that led to the pit, brought it to a standstill, gently let the doll-house down onto the ground, half-dragged, half-lifted it down the bank into the bottom of the pit, very careful not to let it slip or fall. He wished there wasn't so bright a moon. If it was dark, he couldn't see how pretty the darned thing looked, sitting there, with a miniature lawn all around it, on a bed of short green stuff of some kind that had taken root in the gravel pit, and a clump of dock, for all the world like cedar trees, rearing themselves up behind the house, and casting real shad-

ows on the roof. He'd never seen the house outdoors before, with landscape gardening around it.

He knelt down in front of it and opened the façade. The furniture was in terrible confusion. Very carefully Felix began to replace each little piece to its proper position, recalling, as he did so, Sheilah leaning over Esther, in the casket, placing everything so carefully, the folds of her dress, the curls at her temples, her hands, her fingers. He understood why now.

Afterward he closed the façade, climbed the bank of the pit and sat down at the top with his back to the house. He had decided not to commit his deed until after midnight. He wished he knew how to smoke.

2

Felix had been working on his elaborate fabrication for nearly four weeks now. It was the day after Sheilah had left for Avidon's, that Dr. Evarts let drop a suggestion that had resulted in this strange scene in the gravel-pit. Felix had gone to see Dr. Evarts because he couldn't forget his last picture of Sheilah, leaning against the white-toweled back of her parlor-car chair, eyes closed, as she slid past him standing on the platform.

Dr. Evarts had tried to be very reassuring. He believed that Sheilah would return in the fall greatly

improved in health. 'But,' he added, 'she must never be allowed to work so continuously again.' Felix must see to it that there occur frequent periods of relaxation, spent in the open, if possible. 'If you could afford to buy a small car for your wife, it would be splendid,' he threw out, 'or if that is out of the question . . .'

But already the seed was fertilized. He could afford it! Amazing fact! A car for Sheilah! A car that he himself bought for Sheilah! He had never been able to buy anything for her of any account before. All the plans and preparations for her vacation made by another than himself! All her new clothes for the occasion provided by a stranger! The very thought of buying a car for Sheilah was salve to the deeply-buried hurt Felix had been silently enduring ever since Cicely's offer had been accepted.

When he reached the apartment that night after his talk with Dr. Evarts, he made his way immediately to the dining-room closet, groped in the dark interior for his light overcoat, and felt of it. The bond was still there. He closed the door softly upon it, crossed the room to the couch and sat down.

He mustn't arouse Sheilah's suspicion. It would kill her if she ever knew he had stolen anything. He hadn't really stolen it. Just found it, and failed to return it until it was too late. But she wouldn't understand the difference. My, but he hated, though,

to disturb the thing. It was so safe there, buried in the old overcoat. *He* was so safe. But wasn't he willing to run a little risk for Sheilah?

He got up and turned on the light, drew a chair up to the dining-room table, and spread out the evening paper before him. He turned to the advertising section. His eyes fell almost immediately upon an offer of a closed Ford sedan, 'almost as good as new,' for two hundred dollars. Why, it occurred to him, the doll-house would pay for a car for Sheilah! And two doll-houses would pay for its upkeep afterward. He guessed he would go out and take a walk. He could always think things out better underneath the stars.

Now, four weeks later, sitting on the edge of the gravel-pit, it looked to Felix as if his plan was really going to succeed. He didn't think there was a detail he had overlooked, a possibility of discovery he hadn't anticipated. He had rehearsed the story he had prepared for Sheilah over and over again.

A woman in Chicago (Chicago, because it was so far removed) had bought the doll-house. The woman's name was Kauffman (Felix had consulted the Chicago telephone-directory just to make sure such a name existed in Chicago) and her address was some big number in the thousands on a street he'd forgotten. Should Sheilah insist on more detail, he would tell her that he had the woman's letter put

away somewhere, and then when he went to hunt for it, he would be unable to find it. He had sent the duplicate house to the same address, he would explain. He hadn't had time, of course, in a few weeks to furnish the second house (Sheilah well knew how long it took him to make even a dining-room chair) but he'd shopped around town and picked up various pieces for it. The doll-houses had been paid for by checks which he had cashed immediately, and he had settled for the automobile in greenbacks.

Well, he *had* settled for the automobile with *one* greenback! The bond had had a very elaborate greenback. Gosh, but Felix had been glad to get rid of that dangerous oblong of paper.

The little Jew from whom he had bought the Ford had accepted the bond gladly, giving Felix in cash, as he requested, the balance due after deducting the price of the car. Felix had taken the precaution to tear off from the bond the coupons due for the next year and a half, and had burned them up, explaining to the Jew that he'd torn them off by mistake a year ago, and misplaced them. Coupons were dangerous let loose.

Possibly the bond itself would prove to be dangerous too. Felix wasn't quite sure. But he had to run a little risk. Of course there would be coupons turned in, in two years, but surely, by that time,

the search for a single missing bond (if a search was ever made) would be abandoned. There probably would never be any search at all. Mr. Fairchild was such a careless man in regard to his property.

Felix had buried in the overcoat what remained of the bond, in twenty-five-dollar bills, spreading them out in a sort of padding. As he required money for more gasoline, or for other luxuries for Sheilah (she really ought to have a telephone, and for years had wanted twin-beds) he had only to make up more stories of sales for his furniture, which when completed and carried away in his bag, he could destroy (it would be easy to get rid of the little pieces down sewers and drain-pipes) and thus build up for himself a fictional demand for his furniture. Why not? And why wouldn't he thus be paying for the bond bit by bit with his labor — wiping out his crime, if crime it was?

He never seemed to be able to think of it as a crime. In fact what he was about to do to the doll-house seemed to him much more criminal. He'd best get it over with. He descended slowly into the pit, carrying a can of kerosene with him and a roll of newspapers.

3

Awful to see the smoke creeping up the little carved stairway Sheilah had designed, each tread

made so carefully of maple, polished as smooth as amber. Awful, a moment later, to see the pretty windows light up suddenly and gaze at him like eyes, at first surprised and then beseeching.

He didn't stir a muscle. He didn't raise a finger to defend this child of his. Not even when the beast inside began torturing it, sticking its flames like fingers through its windows, and a moment later forcing through a great long arm that wound itself close around the house, meeting another arm from the back, completely encircling it, in a horrible embrace. Or were the arms snakes? There was a statue of a writhing human being Felix had seen once somewhere, all tangled up with a snake like that. He turned away. The smoke choked him and made his eyes smart.

4

Later, gazing down at the little feathery pile of ashes, Felix stooped and scooped up a handful of them. They were as warm as a child's body just dead! They'd cool almost as quick, too, he guessed. He dropped the ashes, wiped his hands on his trousers and set to work with a shovel to cover the dead thing up.

Afterward he wiped his hands again and smelled of them. Gosh! The stuff had gotten into the pores! It was worse than blood.

CHAPTER VIII

I

SHEILAH had planned to leave Avidon's on a Thursday. It was Tuesday now, just before dinner. Sheilah did most of her meditating at Avidon's just before dinner, during the prescribed half-hour of rest, and later as she dressed with luxurious leisure. She was glad that this was not her last night at Avidon's. The Outsiders were giving her a dinner party in the grill, on her last night, and she rather dreaded it. There would be sure to be *au revairs*, *see-you-agains*, and possibly exchanges of addresses, which so far she had successfully avoided. As the hour for her departure drew nearer, Sheilah very much hoped that she would be able to speed back to her hearth and cinders without leaving anything behind to trace her.

Sheilah was wearing her black dress to-night. Roger was taking her out after dinner to show her the moonlight on a beautiful little lake he had discovered in the woods. Roger was always discovering beautiful spots around Avidon's, and showing them to her, or to any appreciative audience, for that matter, she shrugged. But he had never taken her anywhere alone with him in the evening.

Roger had been very careful not to compromise

her in the slightest degree. Never once had he put her in the uncomfortable position of forcing her to make a choice between appearing prudish in his eyes, or unconventional in others. But this afternoon he had said, as she stood a little above him, on the stairs, on her way up to her room to dress, 'I am going to kidnap you to-night. Put on something dark. I've got a canoe tied to an old stump on the edge of a little lake I've found. The moonlight on it is too lovely for you to miss. I'm going to steal you away from the others as soon as it's dark. Understand?'

'But wouldn't the others like it too?'

'No. Just you to-night.'

'But ——'

'It's all right,' he assured her. 'It's perfectly all right. I took Judith there last night after our game of bridge.' He had taken Judith there for the sake of the argument in case it was necessary.

'But Judith ——'

'It's your next-to-last night,' he reminded her, frowning a little as if annoyed that his way should be balked even for an instant. 'I've planned it. I've looked forward to it. It's our last chance. I ——' He stopped abruptly, as if suddenly aware of his amazing insistence, and finished quietly, simply, 'Won't you come?'

She smiled down at him. 'Why of course I'll come,' she laughed softly, 'I'd love to!'

He grasped her hand at that, and drew it to his lips — they were on the second landing, alone, unwatched — and afterward exclaimed in a whisper, 'You're a dear!' Then quickly turned and left her.

That was half an hour ago. He had never kissed her hand before. But sometimes he had exclaimed in that same explosive way of his, 'You're a dear!' when she had said something that amused him.

She liked to have him say, 'You're a dear.' It was like making him laugh. Only nicer. She liked to make him laugh. She liked to have him kiss her hand like that, too. Of course it was just one of his mannerisms. In foreign countries it meant little more than shaking hands.

2

As Sheilah dressed to-night she performed the various rites slowly, with an awareness of her surroundings keener than ever before, because she was so soon to leave them. She had come to love this room of hers, hung here in the treetops, this bit of blue-lavender heaven, so dainty, so exquisite, so perfectly equipped. She glanced at the dressing-table, blue-lavender, like the walls, adorned with her girlhood silver only; at the chest of drawers to match, filled with soft, straight piles of her clothes only; at the low rocking-chair by the window, where so often she sat in contented solitude; at the bed, a broad

luxurious affair, but hers, *hers* alone; at the porcelain-lined bathroom, twinkling like a cut gem with many surfaces. Her morning and evening bath had become a delightful indulgence to Sheilah of which she was almost ashamed. She was, at heart, fearfully epicurean, she was afraid. Cicely had put a large bottle of lavender-colored bathing-salts in the bottom drawer of her trunk. Precious stones, Sheilah liked to fancy, as she sprinkled them profligately morning and night in the cream-colored tub. Bathing in dissolved amethysts, which left behind a faint, fluttering perfume, like that of 'a single wet wood-violet,' Roger Dallinger had said one day.

Sheilah turned her head now sidewise, and bent it to her bare shoulder, with the gesture of a dove preening her neck-feathers, to see if she could catch the elusive fragrance. Then shrugged and made a wry smile at herself in the mirror. How quickly frying potatoes over the kitchen stove at home would consume the perfume of a single wet wood-violet!

In spite of her lingering, Sheilah was ready for dinner early to-night. When she came downstairs, she joined the group on the verandah, gathered to watch the sunset. Several of the Outsiders were there, Roger among them, besides others of the hotel guests. There was an exceptionally beautiful display to-night of salmon-colored sky and violet clouds.

Avidon's is located half-way up what is known as Pine Mountain. Its front verandah commands an uninterrupted view of the western horizon line. Also an uninterrupted view of the last quarter-mile of roadway that emerges from the shelter of some woods in the valley below, and makes a dash for the hotel up over a shorn hill, as bare and exposed as a Scotch moor. There are not many automobiles that climb this road. Avidon's is far removed from the beaten track. The approach of any car is always an occasion of mild interest.

'What kind of an animal do you call that?' suddenly somebody on the verandah exclaimed, pointing down the hill. Everybody turned, abandoning the sunset. Crawling along the road at a snail's pace, there approached a small, dark object, self-propelling and suggestive of an automobile, halting every little while, coming to a dead stop, rolling down the hill a few yards, and making a fresh start.

As witnessed by the idle group of spectators on the verandah and commented upon by them with facetious remarks, it was a highly entertaining sight. The little car threatened so many times to give up the struggle.

'Persistence! Never say die! Excelsior!'

Such was the form of wit indulged in by the group upon the verandah.

3

Felix had no idea he'd got to scale a range of mountains to reach Avidon's. Something had gone wrong with the little car since he'd gotten up into the high altitude. Seemed to lose her vitality. Too rare air for her lungs, or something, he guessed.

Felix hadn't written Sheilah a word about the car. It had flashed over him about a week ago how wonderful it would be to get a few days off, and bring her down 'over the road' like other people. They might even camp out on the way home for a night if he managed to pick her up a day or two before she planned to leave. He had brought an auto tent and other camping equipment. Sheilah used to like to picnic. Gosh! He hoped he was on the right road. It was getting late. He'd better stop, he guessed, at the big hotel on the right up there and inquire.

He had no idea the big hotel on the right was Avidon's. He'd understood Avidon's was a sanitarium. He had pictured a small, sort of country boarding-house affair, like the sanitarium his mother had gone to in Vermont once, to get strong after her operation.

He didn't turn into the driveway that curved up to the front entrance of the hotel. The interested group on the verandah saw him bring his laboring little car to a standstill just beyond the clock golf-

course. Felix had strapped the tent on one of the running-boards, and on the other, blankets and cooking equipment. At close range the car resembled a small burro, one of those pathetic-looking little beasts of burden used on mountain trails, hung with huge side-baskets. A silver-gray burro, for it was covered with dust, the bright black coat of enamel Felix had given it, entirely obliterated. He must stop and clean her up a little, he guessed, before he got to the sanitarium. And himself too, for that matter. The roads had been terribly dry.

'Say,' he called out lustily to a group of people on the front porch of the hotel, 'is this the road to Avidon's?'

4

A sensation as if she were dropping in a runaway elevator shot through Sheilah. The voice sounded so like Felix's. But of course it couldn't be. The elevator assumed its normal speed.

'This *is* Avidon's,' Roger beside her called out cheerily.

'This Avidon's?' the voice insisted. And again the elevator shot down with Sheilah.

'Yes. This is Avidon's. This is right,' several voices replied.

Felix stopped the sputtering engine (better get out and make certain, he guessed), opened the door,

and laboriously climbed over the bulging tent on the running-board.

Sheilah stood speechless for a moment, trying to make the jumble of incoherent facts her eyes were telegraphing so rapidly to her brain, add up and make sense — add up and make Felix. It was Felix's voice, his stature, his stoop, even his overcoat — the light one that used to belong to Gretchen's husband, but *here*, at Avidon's, how was it possible? And the car — the funny little car? However, no one but Felix limped like that, carried just that brand of the war.

Before he had taken a dozen steps she exclaimed in a voice that trembled, 'Why, I think it's somebody I know,' and went down the steps.

Felix saw her coming, and halted. They met half-way between the car and verandah.

'Why, Felix!'

'Hello!' He put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her quickly on the cheek (though perhaps he oughtn't to have, right out in front of the hotel).

'Thought I'd surprise you.'

'I can't believe it's you!'

'It *is*.'

'But how in the world ——?'

'Come and see your new car!'

'Mine?'

The group on the verandah watched them return

side by side to the car, and stand looking at it for a prolonged minute or two, prolonged at least to Roger Dallinger. Who in the devil was the fellow anyhow? Kissing her like that? Getting her all dusty! Sheilah's black gown was cut high in the back. Felix's arm had left a bar of white dust across her shoulders, shaped like a yoke for bearing burdens.

When Sheilah returned with Felix limping beside her, carrying in one hand a cheap straw suitcase, she went straight up to the Outsiders and announced smiling, 'This is my husband. He came to surprise me. I hadn't an idea! I want you all to meet him. I'll begin with you, Judith. Felix, this is Mrs. Lorimer, and next to her is Mr. Lorimer, and next to *him* ——' and she went around the entire circle, her voice light and lilting, her eyes bright, her head held high.

Afterward Felix murmured confusedly, 'Pleased to meet you,' and then holding out his hands for inspection, never well kept, but now covered with grease and grime, 'I guess I'm too dirty to shake hands with ladies.' He could feel the perspiration breaking out on his forehead (perhaps he shouldn't have said 'ladies.' Sheilah had told him one didn't any more), produced a soiled handkerchief and wiped his face.

'Was it a dusty trip?' Judith broke out nervously.

'I'll say so!' he answered, and wiped his face

again. He hadn't an idea Avidon's was such a stylish place. Women with bare arms always made him feel uncomfortable anyhow.

'Have trouble with the car?' one of the men inquired pleasantly.

Felix glanced at him. He was dressed in cream-colored trousers with a crease that ran down to meet cream-colored shoes, a dark blue coat, and a burnt-orange tie. 'I'll say so!' again he answered, and then conscious of the contrast between himself and the man who had just addressed him, 'Gee! Sheilah,' he burst out, 'I'm so hot and sweaty, I guess I better go wash up.'

'Yes,' she agreed pleasantly, 'dinner is nearly ready. We must hurry.' She turned away with him.

Roger, who hadn't said a word, nor stirred, till now, suddenly stepped forward, and with half a dozen short, rapid strokes of his hand, brushed off the bar across Sheilah's shoulders. She looked around at him inquiringly. Their eyes met for a flickering instant.

'You were all over dust,' he said brusquely.

5

Inside the hotel Sheilah conducted Felix to the desk, and introduced him to the clerk in charge. The clerk swung the register around for Felix to sign.

'I'll have his things sent up to your room, I suppose, Mrs. Nawn?' he inquired. 'We often rent that room double.'

'Certainly,' Sheilah replied. (Her room — her lovely room, so unsuspecting). 'We'll go right up, Felix,' she smiled, and turning, led the way.

Inside the room, with the door closed, Felix stood gazing about him, not making a motion to remove his overcoat, nor the dust that lay so thick upon him.

'I didn't know it was such a swell place,' he said. 'I guess I oughtn't to have come.'

A wave of pity and compunction swept over Sheilah.

'Of course you ought.'

'I didn't know you'd made such a lot of swell friends.'

'They're not friends. Only acquaintances.'

'I've only got these clothes.'

'Never mind. You've got a clean shirt, haven't you?'

He nodded.

'That's all right then. I'll fix it for you while you wash. See what a darling little bathroom it is.'

'Probably they've all got Rolls Royces,' he murmured.

She went up to him close at that.

'What of it? I think the new car is lovely, Felix.'

I'm awfully pleased with it. It will be ever so nice having a car to take the children out.' She reached up and took hold of the lapels of his overcoat and gave him a little shake. She simply mustn't let him guess how near she was to bursting into bitter tears, how far from desiring what she now playfully demanded. 'Come kiss me, Felix,' she smiled. '*Really* kiss me, I mean. You haven't seen me for six weeks! . . . There! That's right. Now take off your overcoat, open your suitcase, and I'll help you get dressed.'

6

Roger's table was in one corner of the dining-room and Sheilah's in another. He had liked the space that had intervened, because he could gaze at her profile to his heart's content, without observation. But to-night he did not gaze at Sheilah's profile. He did not see it. He saw only one thing, and he saw it the moment she entered the dining-room, with Felix limping behind her — a second white yoke across her shoulders!

He left the dining-room as soon as possible.

'Coffee, please, in the library,' he told the waitress, as he rose to go.

Frowning, his usually smooth and cloudless brow dark and brooding now, he went out onto the porch, standing a moment by the railing, gazing down into

the valley shimmering in the moonlight he was to have shared with Sheilah. He turned abruptly away from the sight of it, and walking the length of the verandah, entered the library, deserted now, and flung himself down into a low, upholstered chair beside a small table with a single service of coffee upon it.

CHAPTER IX

I

‘Oh, here you are! I’ve looked everywhere.’

She fluttered in unexpectedly like a moth. He rose. Thank Heaven, the white bar was covered by the light coat she had put on.

‘Felix has gone to put the automobile in the garage,’ she explained. ‘I wanted to tell you how sorry I am about to-night. I can’t go with you now, of course.’

‘Of course.’

There was a pause.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘So am I.’

There was another pause.

‘I may not have another chance to see you again. And I want to tell you how much I appreciate everything you’ve done for me here, and thank you for all —’

‘Please don’t,’ he interrupted.

There was a third pause.

Why did he make it so difficult? It had always been so easy to talk to him before. Now a great space seemed to yawn between them.

‘Well, good-bye,’ she brought out abruptly, and offered him her hand. But he didn’t take it. Oh,

very well! She folded her hands behind her. 'We're leaving to-morrow,' she announced curtly. 'We're leaving early in the morning. I shan't see you again.'

'I shall see you in Boston,' he announced.

'Oh, no you won't,' she retorted gayly. There was always the mask of facetiousness to hide behind if necessary. 'You forget I have never given you my address.' And she made her eyes sparkle with assumed merriment.

'Don't be artificial *now*, please,' Roger frowned. 'There are always ways of finding addresses. Don't you want me to see you?'

She looked away from him, slipping off the mask. 'No! I think you'd better not,' she said.

'That isn't saying you don't want me to. Look at me, Sheilah.'

She obeyed. He held her eyes, uncovered now, bared and honest, very carefully, very gently, in his for a half-dozen heartbeats or so. Neither spoke but something definite seemed to happen. The space between them disappeared as if some invisible gossamer thread had been spun between their eyes and the chasm spanned.

'Sheilah, tell me,' Roger said afterward. 'I want to know. I *must* know. Are you happy?'

'Why, of course,' she quavered, 'of course I'm happy. It's a woman's job to be happy, isn't it?'

'That's Baird's idea. That it's every one's job to be happy. Can't I help you in your job a little? I would be so glad if I could.'

'How could you?'

'Oh, just by seeing you occasionally. Being friends. Talking about books and poetry, and — pine trees,' he smiled, 'and other things we both love, once in a while.'

She considered it for a moment, then shook her head.

'No, Roger.' She called him Roger now on rare occasions. It always gave him a thrill, all out of proportion to the cause for it. 'I don't think Dr. Baird would advise it,' she said, her cool little head ruling her with the autocracy of a merciless little queen. 'I don't think seeing you would help me to be a better mother and wife. Do you? And that is my job, too. That, in fact, is my real job. Being happy is just one of the indirect results. Not the goal. Besides,' she added, 'there's no place for you to see me. I live, you see, in a sort of tenement.' She said it with a toss of her head as if it was rather of a joke.

'I think I love you more for that,' Roger exclaimed in a low voice.

She didn't take him too seriously. 'That's nice of you,' she smiled. 'It's a compensation. Dr. Baird says there are always compensations. Oh,' she

burst out, 'I'm *so* glad to have you know all about me at last! Isn't it *good* to be honest together for these last five minutes before I go away?' Her eyes were luminous. She was beautiful.

'Come out on the porch,' said Roger. 'The moonlight is lovely — not so lovely as on the little lake, but better than nothing. Won't you, please? For our last five minutes?'

2

The roof of the porch outside the library cast a black shadow in one corner, and thither Roger led the way. Not with malice aforethought. Simply as an artist seeking the best location from which to view a lovely picture. For it was like looking at a lighted scene upon the stage from the black auditorium of a theater, to gaze upon the illumined valley from the dark corner of the porch. The moon was full — a big, benignant Rubensesque figure, riding the sky with slow, lazy grace, shedding light like a ripened piece of fruit fragrance, or a heavy cloud mist. The valley was bathed with the sifted phosphorescence, falling silently upon the trees below, holding up their feathery branches to catch the heaven-sent spray.

Roger and Sheilah gazed silently upon the scene, Roger half-sitting on the piazza railing, leaning against a supporting pillar behind him; Sheilah

standing beside him, poised lightly, like a bird. Roger drew in a deep breath of the moonlight-burdened air. So did Sheilah. They didn't speak. They didn't stir, but each heard the other breathe, and suddenly the beauty of the moonlight (or was it the beauty of each other's nearness?) and the realization that the minutes were narrowing to seconds became too much to bear. Roger reached out his hand, met Sheilah's, and drew her unresisting to him. She was conscious of his arms about her, and as she sank against him, of a feeling of solidity and safety.

He held her carefully, tenderly, as he had her trusting eyes a little while ago. His coat felt rough and strange against her cheek. She closed her eyes an instant. She could hear a low, deep, muffled thudding, slow and strong and steady. Suddenly Roger was aware of a motion of submission. His heart leaped, and he leaned, searching. But she pushed against him at that. 'Trust me,' he whispered. And she did! He placed his lips long and gently on the edge of the wine-cup, but he did not drink.

3

All the next day, rattling down over the dusty roads in the little car beside Felix, Sheilah lived over and over again her last five minutes alone with Roger — her last half-minute. She wasn't sorry. She regretted nothing. He hadn't kissed her. If her

lips had been the petals of a flower he couldn't have been more careful not to crush them. Oh, had ever any woman before received such a strange, illusive, and provocative caress? What had he meant by it? What had he felt? There was reverence in it, tenderness, protection — all dear to every woman — but there was besides, she thought, that which is sometimes dearer. His breathing had been difficult. His lips had trembled. She had felt them tremble. It was then that she had suddenly realized where she was, what she was doing, and with a start had broken away from him.

He had released her instantly. She had sped quickly back through the library to the main hall, to lights and voices and people again, and the part she had yet to play. Just in time to answer to her cue — just as Felix entered from another door, and one of the Outsiders rose to meet him.

Roger, left alone, watched her flutter away from him like a moth, as she had come, or a butterfly which he had caught, held a moment, and then let go.

Sheilah hadn't seen him again till morning. In spite of her remonstrances several of the loyal survivors of the Outsiders rose at seven-thirty to wave her good-bye. She made her departure from the front porch of the hotel, with no word of apology for the overburdened little car, taking her proper place

beside Felix, with a smile, gallantly waving, and calling a last bright, crisp 'good-bye,' as the car fussed and sputtered out of the drive.

'How sporting,' remarked Judith in a low tone to Roger beside her.

He didn't reply. He couldn't, for the little car was bearing away beyond his sight and beyond his reach the woman that he loved!

4

'Kauffman?' brightly Sheilah inquired an hour later. 'Did you say the name of the woman who bought the doll-house was Kauffman?'

She simply must control her wayward thoughts, her wayward feelings, still quivering with disappointment because there hadn't been an opportunity to see Roger alone to say good-bye to him properly.

'Yes,' replied Felix, 'Kauffman, or Hoffman — something like that.'

But their eyes had met for a moment, after she had taken her place beside Felix and the car had begun to move — for a precious moment, for there had been a strange new light in Roger's eyes, a sort of scorching brightness, as if, it occurred to Sheilah now, the sherry had suddenly caught fire.

'She lived in Chicago somewhere,' Felix was saying. 'It was like this. You see . . . ' he went

into a long and detailed explanation. 'I've got her address put away somewhere, I guess, if you want to see it,' he finished, five, ten, fifteen minutes later.

'Oh, no,' said Sheilah, 'it doesn't matter. Just so she bought it and paid for it, and had a friend who did the same.'

Oh, it was much simpler deceiving Sheilah than he had feared.

'I've got some other orders, too, for little pieces of furniture,' he dared announce.

'How nice! How very nice!' softly she exclaimed, and lapsed into a long silence.

She would probably never see Roger Dallinger again. He would never know whether or not she was offended by his kiss. *Was* it a kiss? She closed her eyes. She could see the sifting moonlight better in the dark, and relive more vividly the pulsing seconds of the strange, unnamable caress — so indefinite, so evanescent in quality, and yet so piercing. The fragrance without the flower. The sharp edge without the blade. Strange the edge cut even deeper in retrospect, the fragrance was even sweeter. Suddenly Sheilah opened her eyes wide. This wouldn't do!

'And you say Phillip has grown fat?' she exclaimed, 'and Roddie tall, and Laetitia freckled?' (The children had been at home for a week now.) 'I'm ever so anxious to see them. I can hardly wait.'

She wouldn't *let* herself think about Roger Dallinger any more. She was an intelligent human being. Surely she could select her own thoughts — her own acts.

'Let me run the car,' desperately, in the middle of the afternoon, she suggested to Felix. 'I used to run one years ago.'

But even with her hands upon the wheel and her eyes upon the road she couldn't escape Roger. It was as if a spring long buried had suddenly broken through the surface of her consciousness, and try as she might she could not stem its steady, gentle flow.

Sheilah had decided not to attempt the camping-out venture, but to push through to the children in one day. The little car drew up to the curb in front of the apartment house at about eight o'clock at night. Before Sheilah had stepped out onto the sidewalk there was a surprised shout from one of the windows, and before she could reach the front door the children were upon her, all three, flushed and excited, all talking at once, calling her name.

'Hello, Mother. You all well, Mother? Do you like our new car, Mother? Were you surprised, Mother? We got a telephone, Mother. I got a medal at camp, Mother. You going to stay at home now, Mother?'

Her heart swelled with something she had been too tired to feel for a long while. She hugged them to her tight — each in turn, Roddie, Laetitia, Phillip — *her* children! She had forgotten they were so dear to her — that she was so dear to them.

Later they all sat down together on the couch in the dining-room; Phillip, grown rosy and almost round, in her lap; Roddie on one side of her, straighter and manlier somehow with his close haircut; and Laetitia, on the other, with the new, dear freckles on her nose. And no powder at all! Nor even the smell of it! They all had such long stories to tell, that it was nearly ten o'clock before Sheilah even thought of the time, or of the fact that she and Felix had had no supper. They all five foraged in the refrigerator. How it cried out for her attention! And other things too! She was eager to get at them. Duties that had seemed like bars to imprison her a few weeks ago, were now opportunities — strings of a harp upon which to play, and show her skill.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Sheilah heard Phillip's prayers that night. After she rose from the bedside she crossed the room to the window to lower the upper sash. As she raised the window-shade, she was struck by the sight of a great big moon, peering at her from over the roof of the next apartment house. She peered back at it defiantly. She wasn't afraid now. She hadn't thought of Roger Dallinger

for two hours and a half! She crossed the hall to her own room, triumphant and light-hearted.

'Come, Felix. Time to go to bed,' she called.

5

Sheilah had brought back much new practical knowledge from the log-cabin in the woods, and she applied it to her own particular case with diligence and determination.

Maladaptation to one's own peculiar circumstances (and almost every one's circumstances are a little peculiar) is often the result of ignorance. Sheilah had been taught by Dr. Baird the rules of efficient living, and she intended to profit by her knowledge.

At the end of the first fortnight she wrote Dr. Baird that everything was going beautifully. She rose early; she performed her household duties smilingly; not kicking against the pricks of their homeliness and drudgery (there can be joy and beauty in every job done well); sending the children off to the public school (the influence of which she had so deplored for them) with no futile regrets, because it was inevitable; holding always before her Dr. Baird's assurance that a mother's influence was the stronger; acting as wisely as she knew how for the best, and then not worrying about results over which she had no control. Ignoring her physical sensations as if

non-existent, but following the rules for keeping physically fit. She rested an hour a day. She exercised outdoors an hour a day. She ran the little Ford out into the country, whenever there was a chance, climbed a hill, lay down on it, and drank of its beauty and strength and peace. And thought of Roger sometimes. She *let* herself think of him now. For as the moon had waned, so mercifully had the acuteness of his memory.

Gazing up at the sky one day in late September, Sheilah observed with a little pang that the luxurious queen of a fortnight ago who had ruled the sky with such magnificence and splendor was now but a frail white ghost — a broken half-circle of transparent cloud, pierced by faint blue sky. But the frail white ghost was simply a disguise the queen wore, while she bided her time.

BOOK FOUR

CHAPTER I

I

SHEILAH had been at home nearly three weeks when the telephone bell rang one morning about half-past eleven. She was in the kitchen, scouring the brass faucets over the sink. She wore gloves. She was very careful of her hands since her return from Avignon's. She kept them as nicely as she made the beds now. One could, if one cared enough. Rubber gloves for cutting vegetables, cotton gloves for cleaning brass and silver, kid gloves for the appliance of rose-water and glycerine at night. She pulled off her cotton gloves now, and went into the dining-room. Probably the provision-man who was supposed to call her at nine-thirty.

'Hello.'

'Hello.'

It was *not* the provision-man!

'May I speak to Mrs. Nawn?'

'This is she.'

'Hello, Sheilah.' And then, as if she didn't know — as if she hadn't known from the first instant that he had spoken — 'This is Roger Dallinger,' the voice announced. 'How are you?'

'All right. How are *you*?'

'All right. By the way, you going to be at home, by any chance, late this afternoon?'

'Oh, I am sorry. I'm afraid I——'

'Oh, well, never mind. I just wanted to leave something of yours I have.'

'Why, I haven't missed anything. It can't be of any importance. Don't bother, please.'

'It's no bother. I'll drop around with it, somewhere around four-thirty this afternoon, and if you're not there, why, I'll just leave it at the door.'

'Oh, please don't. Really I——'

'You don't have to stay at home for me.'

'I know. But——'

'I'll be there. Good-bye.'

'But you don't know where I live.'

'Oh, don't I?' he retorted, and then in a low confidential tone he added, 'I like the ruffled curtains, better than the plain ones.'

Sheilah had been experimenting with new curtains in her front room this last week.

'You do!' she gasped.

'Yes,' he went on ingenuously, as if unaware that he had said anything incriminating. 'I think ruffles jollier somehow, at least from the outside. I'll tell you what I think from *inside* this afternoon, if you're there.'

'But I——'

'That's all right,' he interrupted. He simply

wouldn't let her speak. 'Don't change your plans. I shall drop in at half-past four anyway. Good-bye,' and he hung up.

Sheilah hung up too, sitting very still afterward, with her hands clasped in her lap. She held up one hand finally before her in amazement. That shaking hand alone was sufficient reason for her not to be at home when Roger called this afternoon. She had thought her infatuation for him (for such she named the disturbance in her emotions following the moonlight night) was over. But it seemed she had only to hear his voice over the telephone to be set trembling like a girl in her teens!

She went back to her brass polishing with indignation in her heart. She polished hard and vigorously for twenty minutes, and as her hands became steady and her heart beat normally, her intelligence assumed its proper position of supremacy. He simply wanted to call and leave something she had forgotten — a perfectly conventional thing to do. It would be ridiculous to run away from him. His voice over the telephone had been light and casual. Probably that last half-minute on the verandah had meant little more to *him* than a ceremonious kissing of her hand. Much wiser to see him, and prove by a light and casual manner to match his, that it had meant little more to *her*.

But the mere thought that she was so soon to see

Roger again, filled Sheilah with such a choking sensation of joy, that her intelligence held up a warning hand to her. Better not. Better not. Safer to get into the Ford, about three o'clock, and drive out into the country and tramp miles till supper-time. Oh, well, she wouldn't decide definitely, until after lunch. No harm anyway in fixing up the poor shabby little front room as nicely as possible; and pull out the white ruffles on the new muslin curtains. How like him to call them 'jolly.'

She was busy with the ruffles, when the telephone bell rang again. This surely would be the provision-man. But no. It was Cicely. Just home from her month in the Berkshires. She was in Boston for the day. She hadn't seen Sheilah since her return from Avidon's. She would run out at about half-past two for half an hour, if Sheilah was to be at home.

Luckily it was Friday. All the children remained at school all day on Fridays. Sheilah had an uninterrupted two hours before Cicely was due, to straighten out the apartment, and change her dress, and decide whether or not she'd go for a tramp in the country after Cicely left.

2

It was a very happy Cicely Morgan who stopped before Sheilah's door that afternoon. There were soft, pleasant lines hovering around her eyes and

mouth, and her voice was soft and pleasant too, when she spoke to the chauffeur. In spite of the fact, too, that she had just been kept waiting at her dressmaker's for nearly three quarters of an hour. It was now nearly half-past three. But nothing seemed to disturb Cicely's peace of mind to-day. For that morning she had received a gram of her old magic, had dissolved it in a rich mixture of anticipation, and drank often of it all day. The morning mail had contained a note from Roger Dallinger — a brief and formal acceptance to a dinner-party she was giving, but it began, 'Cicely,' and was signed, 'Roger.'

Cicely had hesitated before inviting Roger to dinner, but in view of the interchange of ceremonies the preceding spring, and his own expressed desire to call upon her sometime in the fall, it seemed to her entirely in accordance with her idea of good taste.

Since automobiles had brought Boston within easy motoring distance of Wallbridge, Cicely Morgan's dinner-parties often included Bostonians, and usually interesting Bostonians. Roger had become an interesting Bostonian himself now — a lawyer in a well-known firm, to the distinguished prestige of which he had been no small contributor. Cicely was glad that she was in a position to provide him at dinner with a group of successful contemporaries in his own, as well as other professions, and offer him besides as attractive a selection of women as existed.

The guests for this particular dinner-party were all chosen with Roger in view. The gown Cicely was to wear at this particular dinner-party (the fitting for which had delayed her to-day) was also chosen with Roger in view. Already she was planning on the food, and flowers, and wines, with Roger in view. She felt absurdly young and light-hearted. She kissed Sheila tenderly. She had brought her flowers — rich, red, shaggy chrysanthemums.

‘Smelling of football games,’ laughed Sheila, as she took them, and ran to put them in a high vase, thinking, ‘They’ll make the room prettier for Roger, if I decide to stay and see him.’

‘How much nicer you look here!’ Cicely exclaimed, glancing around the apartment. ‘And how well *you’re* looking. And *so pretty!* Are you really better? I don’t need to ask. I see it in your eyes. You seem to be just glowing. You’re happier, aren’t you, Sheila?’

‘Oh, yes. Much. Especially this afternoon — somehow. Seeing you, and everything. I’m *very* happy. And oh — ever so much better. I’ve so much to tell you!’

‘Well, tell me. I can stay a little while.’ She glanced at her wrist. (‘Not too long,’ Sheila hoped.) ‘Tell me all about it — whom you met, what you did, what you learned — everything.’

Sheila’s letters to Cicely had been brief. She

hadn't mentioned Roger. She didn't now, by name. Only referred to him as 'a man who was awfully nice to me.'

'A *man?*' Cicely gently jibed her.

Sheilah flushed.

Cicely laughed, and hugged her, and mercifully changed the subject. 'What about some new fall clothes?'

'How good of you, Cicely! But I don't need clothes any more. I'd much rather have the money. I do so want Laetitia to be in the right environment. The summer has been wonderful for her. She's so much finer, since her summer in a place where fineness was an ideal. All the children are so improved. I've a little money of mother's, you know, and I think perhaps next year I can manage, with a little help, to send Laetitia to a private school. I do so want to.'

'Do you? Well, we must talk about it.'

They were still talking about it when Roger Dalling's gray coupé roadster drew up behind Cicely's black limousine at exactly half-past four.

3

Sheilah's eyes had been on the clock for the last ten minutes, but she found herself unprepared for the buzz of the bell that made her escape from Roger impossible. She simply couldn't run away now. Circumstances had decided it for her.

'That's the front-door bell. I must answer it,' she said, and went to press the button that would release the door three stories below. When she returned, 'Don't go just yet,' she said to Cicely who had risen. After all it would make the meeting with Roger easier and more conventional if she had a caller. 'I think this may be the man who was nice to me this summer. Do wait and see him.'

'But it's after half-past four.'

'For just a minute. You'll *have* to anyway. He's on his way up.' And she opened the door into the hall. She heard Roger's steps slowly ascending the last flight of stairs, and before he had quite reached the top, saw him hesitate, and glance about uncertainly.

'This way,' she called.

'Oh, you're here!'

'Just by chance.'

They were shaking hands now.

'I hope you didn't stay in for me,' he laughed.

'Of course I didn't,' she laughed back. 'Come in this way, please. I want you to meet my cousin, Miss Morgan. This is Mr. Dallinger, Cicely.'

They were in the little front room now — all three. For a moment Cicely and Roger just stared at each other. It was Roger who recovered first.

'Your cousin!' he exclaimed, 'Cicely Morgan your cousin! Why, Cicely, how do you do.' He shook

hands with her enthusiastically. 'This is splendid!' He was complete master of the situation. He would be, thought Cicely. 'How are you? You look wonderfully.'

Cicely replied, 'I'm very well, thank you.'

Roger turned to Sheilah. 'Your cousin and I are old friends,' he announced.

'Really?' groped Sheilah. When — where — how? That tantalizing sensation again! And then it flashed over her! She remembered it all! The sunny winter morning; the high banks of snow; Cicely stopping her; telling her about Roger Dallinger; the look in her eyes; the tone of her voice; 'I remember!' she said, slowly, wonderingly. 'Why, I remember.' And she stared at Cicely, suddenly become so cold, and formal, and withdrawn.

'Oh, no, you don't,' scoffed Roger. 'You never heard of my existence.' Sheilah didn't contradict him. 'I mailed you a note last night,' Roger remarked, turning to Cicely. 'I'm delighted to come to dinner with you on the sixth, or is it the eighth?'

That was all the impression her invitation had made! 'The eighth,' she replied. 'I received your note this morning.' Her intonation was smooth and flawless.

'I've a great deal to talk to you about — years to make up,' Roger rushed on. 'Among other things I want to discuss this fellow inmate of mine.' He

nodded toward Sheilah. 'She was at Avidon's this summer, and so was I. You remember Avidon's?'

Cicely nodded.

'Why, she sent me there,' Sheilah announced. 'But for Cicely ——'

'Oh, I begin to see light,' Roger exclaimed. 'She was rather a mystery to us, you know,' he told Cicely, smiling across at Sheilah fondly — too fondly. 'Well —' he broke off, 'she did you credit, Cicely. She was very popular at Avidon's.'

4

Cicely's voice had lost its soft mellow note, and her eyes their kindness, when she stepped into her automobile a little later, and told the chauffeur to drive directly home.

Oh, what wouldn't she give to recall that dinner invitation to Roger — to recall the dinner itself? She had lost all pleasure in it now. Oh, why had she allowed Roger Dallinger to come into her life again? He always only hurt her, always only humiliated her, and cast her pride in the dust. Why had she drunk again of his poisonous magic? The first reaction of elation was always followed by disappointment and despair, and worse — jealousy. There is no poison more deadly than jealousy, no emotion more devastating. Several of her women friends were jealous of *her*, and men used to be. How

she despised them for it. How she despised herself for it. Strange coincidence, that she should have sent Sheilah into Roger's very arms. Any one could see there was something between them. How happy Sheilah had seemed, and glowing. And how she had flushed when she had jibed her about the man who had been nice to her at Avidon's. And later how elaborately at ease Roger had tried to appear; and yet how impossible for him to avoid centering the entire conversation upon Sheilah, and the impression she had made at Avidon's, smiling at her in that fond, tender way of his, *she* used to know so well. What were they doing now together, alone?

She closed her eyes to shut out the image of it. How unaware they were of her, and her bitterness, and humiliation. Well, they would be *always* unaware. She would go abroad again as soon as possible. The underlying motive in returning to America had been the possibility of some sort of renewed relationship with Roger. But it was impossible. It had been demonstrated. She cared for him too much — still too much. Oh, when would the years come to her rescue?

5

But nothing happened between Sheilah and Roger that afternoon that Cicely needed to close her eyes to. Masked in his lightest and airiest manner he

concealed even from Sheilah herself the earnestness of his feelings.

Left alone with her his first remark had been about the curtains. 'Yes, I like these better from the *inside* too. Ruffled muslin curtains always put me in mind of a clothes-yard in the country on a sunny Monday morning.' And his second about the chrysanthemums, 'What beauties! And to be growing in a clothes-yard too!' And his third, as he gazed slowly about him, 'So this is the tenement — the tower — the beautiful princess lives in!' And then quickly, for fear she might think he was getting personal (as perhaps he was. It was difficult not to, with Sheilah standing right here in the same room with him), he switched off. 'So Cicely Morgan is your cousin! What a coincidence!'

He stayed less than half an hour. It had been his firm intention to stay less than ten minutes — just to drop in, this first time, to prove to her there was nothing more about him to fear here in Boston than at Avidon's. But the minutes flew so! They used up the first ten discussing Cicely, and the next ten the Outsiders, and the next five the reason for his call. It was Sheilah who referred to the reason first.

'Whatever can it be of mine you are returning?'

He produced it from a side pocket.

'A book I bought for you two weeks ago, and have been borrowing since without your permission. A

volume of "Amy's" poems. "The blue tiles of the sky" is in it, and other things I like, and you'll like, too, I think. I've marked the things I liked — lightly, in pencil. You can rub the marks out if you don't agree.'

'But, I ——'

For a moment he was afraid she was going to refuse the book. It would have hurt him terribly if she had.

Perhaps she surmised it, for suddenly she smiled, and reached out her hand. 'Thank you so much. I shall love reading it.'

And he replied quickly, impulsively, in a voice she remembered afterward, 'I shall love having you!' The clock struck five. 'I must go,' he broke off.

'But,' she laughed, 'you haven't even sat down yet!'

They were still standing by the chrysanthemums, where Cicely had left them half an hour ago. It hadn't occurred to them to sit down.

'I will next time,' he laughed at her. 'Sometimes I'm out this way, and I shall drop in.' He didn't ask her if he might — just made the statement, adding quickly, before she could object, 'Good-bye. It's been wonderful to see you,' and held out his hand.

She put her own on it. 'Good-bye' she smiled at him.

And suddenly he did such a strange, unprece-

dented thing — such a sweet, strange, unprecedented thing. He placed his forefinger lightly on her lips and pressed them gently, looking straight into her eyes, and then quickly, as if the act had slipped out against his will, and he wished to cover it up, 'It's later than I thought. I must hurry. How early it grows dark,' he said, and left her.

6

Half an hour later, Sheilah greeted the children with shining eyes. She put her arms around them, held them close. Oh, how rich she was! How happy she was! She greeted Felix with the same shining eyes. She sang to herself, as she used to years ago, as she prepared the supper. She laughed and told amusing stories at the supper-table later.

'Mother's better than before she was sick,' said Laetitia.

After supper she went over to Felix with that same singing feeling in her heart, put her arm around his bent shoulders, and admired a little armchair he was sandpapering, leaning down afterward and kissing the back of one of his big clumsy hands.

CHAPTER II

I

ALL that fall and winter whenever Roger Dallinger called at the apartment to leave a book for Sheilah he thought she might like, or inquire for the children during the four weeks when one after another each had an attack of influenza, and bring them some flowers, or a game, or a picture-puzzle; or, as he became acquainted with Felix, to present the work-bench in the dining-room with some new labor-saving device, he always left in Sheilah's heart that same strange feeling of singing — that same strange quivering sense of joy that expressed itself in a passionate desire on her part to be kinder and more generous to the children, kinder and more generous to Felix.

Although sometimes Roger stayed less than ten minutes, and often there was no chance to talk to him uninterruptedly and alone (the children came to delight in his society), still always it was as if he had lit a candle in her life that shed a warm rosy glow over all the plain homely details for hours afterward. Oh, surely his coming was right, was good! Surely Dr. Baird would approve. He made her a better mother, a better wife. Enriched her. Became

a hidden source of vitality and beauty to her, so that she was able to give more abundantly to those for whose happiness she was responsible. Like a buried spring, hidden in the side of a mountain, enriching the soil from beneath, secretly and silently feeding the roots of rare and lovely flowers that starred the mossy bank.

She told him so one late afternoon in January, in her characteristic, indirect way, likening him to the buried spring (they still talked in similes sometimes), pursuing her shy, unformed thought slowly, gropingly, as he sat and listened silently across the room, turning his eyes away from her finally, partaking cautiously, sparingly, of the dainty food she offered him, afraid his hunger might burst out in some ravenous and greedy act.

This was the first time she had referred to their friendship (if that was the name for it), and its significance to her. As he listened he felt fully repaid for all his restraint. He wished only for the privilege of seeing Sheilah occasionally, and taking part in making her happy. And she was telling him that he was succeeding! Well — he would continue to succeed. He would make of their relations one of those ideal friendships Carl Baird talked about, controlled and governed by intelligence. Doing good to each other, helping each other, never stooping to the instinctive. Why, it could go on for-

ever, if only — if only he didn't think of her eyes, or her hair, or how her lips had felt that night, or would feel, if . . . They were curved now in one of her kindest smiles for him, and her blue eyes were shrouded in a sort of soft gray mist as she said, 'When you first suggested coming to see me last fall, I was afraid it might make me less able to do my duty happily here, but it hasn't. It doesn't. I wanted to tell you so. You make the burdens I have to carry seem lighter.'

'That's all I want to do,' he said — he *lied*. He wanted terribly to take her in his arms!

2

It was far from his intention to do so, however. All winter he maintained his relationship to Sheilah as safe and wise friend — as safe and wise professional advisor. For thus he became; as her lawyer, looking over the property left her by her mother, and reinvesting it for her; discovering among the slender packet of papers certain securities once given her father, which Sheilah had been told were worthless; and to her amazement turning them into a source of steady income for her. Not much. A few hundred dollars a year, but enough to insure boarding-school later for Roddie as well as for Laetitia. Cicely was helping with Laetitia. Cicely had sailed for Europe just before Christmas, but her generous check for

Laetitia had arrived before she left. Roger had taken charge of it, and invested it so favorably, that it threatened to double itself before ever Laetitia entered the school, laughingly he told Sheilah one day.

It became a source of constant joy to Roger to be able to help Sheilah a little materially. He wished it might be more. But he mustn't arouse her suspicions. She would never take money from him, even as a loan. She wasn't suspicious in the least, and as long as he kept his hands off her, he considered his deception perfectly ethical. But one night his hands strayed — his arms too. It wasn't premeditated. It just happened. Perhaps it had to happen.

It was after the theater one night in late March. He had never taken Sheilah to the theater before. There was a play that came to town which he wanted her to see, and to see with *him*. There was a beautiful moonlight scene in it between two lovers. Roger asked Felix too. They all went together.

Roger fully expected to say good-night to Sheilah at the door of the waiting Ford outside the theater. But the Ford wouldn't start. Felix didn't know what the matter was with the car. He couldn't say how long it would take him to fix it. It was late and raining. The result was, Roger took Sheilah home in his car which was just around the corner.

He was terribly conscious of her, seated in the low seat of the car beside him, the rain-splashed wind-

shield shutting them away, alone. He had been terribly conscious of her all the evening. He had been feeling the sweetness of the nearness of her for two hours and a half, in the darkened theater. And she, too, had been feeling the sweetness of the nearness of him! When the car had left the crowded thoroughfares, and was purring along the dark, shadowed parkway that led to the street where Sheilah lived, suddenly, impulsively, Roger reached out one hand, guiding the car with the other, and placed it palm upwards on Sheilah's knee. She glanced down at it an instant, and then as naturally as she would have returned his smile, placed her own in it. It was enough. He grasped that quick, spontaneous response of hers eagerly. And thus they sat till they reached Sheilah's door, something running between them, through their clasped hands, that robbed them of the power of speech, that likewise seemed to rob them of the power to loosen their grasp.

The lights in the hall of the apartment were always put out at eleven o'clock. It was wrapped in the pitch blackness of the third-floor hall, just outside the door of the muslin-curtained front room, that Roger touched again the edge of the wine-cup. And this time he drank!

He did not know at the time whether or not Sheilah drank too. It was later in his room, as he rehearsed the dizzy scene, and every detail of it —

where they had stood, in what position, and every slight change and shift of that position, that he recalled the pressure of her hands on his arms, not pushing him away, but clinging! The memory of them kept recurring to him over and over again, and each time with sharper, keener sweetness. For clinging hands tell more than defenceless lips.

3

Sheilah didn't know that she had told Roger anything. She didn't know that she had anything to tell him. She was as unaware, at first, of the serious thing that had happened to her as she had been of her clinging hands.

After he left her in the dark hall on the threshold of the front room, she went in and closed the door softly on his receding footsteps, mechanically turning on the light and going to her room to take off her things, too stunned to think or feel anything; performing the mechanical acts of undressing and getting into bed in a state of sort of mental and emotional numbness. It wasn't until she woke near morning sometime, that she began to feel and to suffer. Remorse and self-disillusionment crowded out all the joy that might have been hers — that would have been hers, had she been free, either from Felix, or from her merciless conscience.

Of what sort of clay was she made? She was a

married woman, and a man not her husband had held her in his arms and kissed her! Not once, but twice — three times! And she had let him! She had wanted him to! Why, such a woman was unfit to be the guide of a daughter, was unfit to be the honored mother of a son, was unfit to be the trusted wife of any faithful man. Felix, six feet away, in the bed beside her, lay asleep and unaware, as confident in her goodness as she was in his. She had looked down upon Felix once. She had been ashamed of him. But now it was herself she was ashamed of — herself she looked down upon. Well — it should never happen again. She would see to it that Roger never — never touched her again.

Futile, useless resolve. There was Roger to deal with. Her clinging hands had told him something he wanted terribly to have them tell him again. And they did, a brief fortnight later! And afterward occurred the same numbness, the same remorse, the same resolves, the same slowly increasing longing in her every day he was absent to see him again — to feel him again, and the same giving-in. The gentle candlelight he had been in her life became a threatening fire finally that she fought day and night. The hidden spring broke through the surface at last, and became a swift, eager, rushing stream, she desperately tried to push back into the mountain's side and bury again.

For a little while apparently everything went on the same. Roger dropped in at the apartment as casually as before and left as casually, frequently not seeing Sheilah alone, frequently not seeing her at all, purposely coming sometimes when she was out, to talk to Felix or the children, not to deceive them, but because they were part of her whom he so adored. When Roger and Sheilah were together, however, every moment was vital, every glance a caress, every touch an embrace. At first they did not acknowledge in words that there existed anything serious between them, but they saw the outline of it growing clearer and more palpable each time they met, like a ghost slowly coming alive, — a ghost which Roger well knew was unwelcome to Sheilah, but which she could not resist.

How he loved her for not being able to resist it, deploring the while that it should cause her unhappiness — that anything connected with him should cause her unhappiness. He realized that a clandestine relationship, even as restrained as he intended to keep theirs, must entail suffering for a sensitive woman, and for a while he considered disappearing out of her life altogether, and save her from that suffering. But that would be a cruel thing to do. She depended upon him already, and looked to him for reassurance and protection, not deser-

tion in this new, startling experience. It seemed to him kinder to stand by, calm her fears, allay her misgivings, accustom her gently and gradually to a state of affairs not unusual in the life of many a good woman who has discovered too late the man with whom she could have been happy. Denied the closest relationship with him, she often accepts the makeshift of a rare and beautiful friendship.

Sheilah was a New-Englander and a Puritan. Another man less fine, less acute than Roger would have been unable to carry on such a delicate relationship with such a woman even for a little while. But Roger, too, was a New-Englander and a Puritan. Moreover, he loved Sheilah. His love for her gave him an insight into her reactions that his regard for other women (as, for instance, for Cicely whom he always had so unwittingly hurt) had never awakened. He thought, felt, and suffered with Sheilah constantly, and anticipated and guarded and protected her constantly.

He knew, for instance, how subterfuge and any specific underhand act of deceit would fill her with remorse and self-reproach. Never did he ask her to meet him alone by appointment outside the apartment. Only twice did he take her out in the open green country they both loved so, in his car. For the second time she had had to deceive Laetitia, her own daughter, as to where she had been, and it

had scorched and seared her for days afterward. He saw her, therefore, only at the apartment, going more and more frequently in the early afternoon before the children had come home from school.

At first he tried to resist caresses altogether, for he knew how high a price a woman like Sheilah must pay for them if stolen. But not succeeding completely he made her feel how precious they were to him, and how much more precious than as if she were free to respond openly, at no sacrifice of her code of honor. He never partook of a caress, even a light caress, lightly, and was never gay nor flippant afterward, but quiet and awed, as if he had just received a sacrament of some sort, and his soul, not his body alone, was stirred. So because her love was so revered, and every little sign and symbol of it so highly valued, gradually Sheilah's early sense of shame that had dulled her elation like tarnish, disappeared under Roger's constant tending and care, and was slowly persuaded into a glowing sense of pride.

With the same insight Roger also foresaw another fear that might arise due to the galling fact that she was a woman in hiding, unacknowledged, unrecognized, whom he could not marry. It would not be strange if she wondered sometimes what more she was to him than merely a woman he wished to kiss. He proved to her what more she was to him. He proved

it beyond all shadow of doubt, and without delay. After that first kiss in the dark outside the little front room, Roger told Sheilah all there was to tell about himself during the years before she knew him, and asked her to ask him all there was to ask, which is more convincing to a woman than any declaration.

She alone of all women he crowned with the honor of his confidences, keeping no secrets from her, nothing hidden, gradually opening all the sealed jars of his past, and pouring the ashes, sacred and otherwise, of all his deeds, good and bad, into her hands, into her keeping. She, thus persuaded, thus convinced, likewise opened her sealed jars, poured out the ashes of her past deeds, of her past hopes, disappointments and suppressions, into Roger's hands, into Roger's keeping.

They approached nearer absolute honesty with each other than is often reached by two human beings. Because they must constantly starve the flame of love between them, they added fuel all the more extravagantly to the fire which was allowed, and for a little while their spirits became molten into one over the white coals of truth. Oh, if they only hadn't possessed bodies.

CHAPTER III

I

It all would have been a simple matter if Sheilah had been a different kind of woman. Roger was ready to do anything to assume the complete responsibility of her happiness, and there were avenues of escape that he could have opened for her. But Sheilah would not even reach out toward a happiness that any one else must pay for.

‘I shall never do anything to hurt Felix,’ she said. ‘I want you to know that. If we can be friends without hurting Felix, all right. But otherwise ——’ She shook her head. ‘Felix is my duty, Roger, while you,’ she smiled and shrugged, ‘while you are only my joy.’

‘Haven’t you a right to a little joy?’ asked Roger. ‘Haven’t you paid your debt to duty? Haven’t you been paying it all your life?’

‘When is it right for one ever to stop?’ she asked wistfully, ‘and when is it right for one ever to hurt an innocent person? Felix has always been good and faithful to me. He has always done all he could to make me happy. Such a man does not deserve to be treated cruelly. It would just about kill Felix if he lost me, or his faith in me. I married him of my own free will, of my own accord, against the advice of

others. I took him on. He is my responsibility, and always will be. Besides there's my duty to my children.'

'I would do anything for your children, Sheilah — give them everything that money, combined with my love for their mother, could provide.'

'I know, Roger. I know you would. But it wouldn't make up for what they would lose. What sort of an example would I be to them if I should run away from the responsibility I took on? If I should desert the father whom I've taught them to love and honor for his gentleness and kindness and faithfulness. No, I shall never even consider deserting Felix. And please let us never mention it again,' she pleaded. 'It hurts me too much. It makes me realize how far away I've strayed. And you mustn't think I don't love Felix,' she added. This was in the very beginning of the realization of her love for Roger, when she was fighting hard to love Felix too — to love two men at once. 'I do. I always have loved him, I think. Differently, of course. It's sort of pity I feel for Felix, while for you ——'

'Yes, for me, Sheilah?'

'Oh, for you —— it's just a sort of steady wanting — a kind of gnawing hunger.'

When a woman says a thing like that, in a voice that breaks, and with her eyes misty with tears —

when the woman you love says a thing like that, it takes a strong man indeed — or a light man indeed (a faun-like creature whom love touches superficially) to resist satisfying that wanting, that hunger a little. Roger was not a light man, nor yet a very strong one, he concluded, when he was near Sheilah and her voice broke and there were tears in her eyes. Was he greatly to be blamed for taking her in his arms that day?

He didn't kiss her. He seldom kissed her, she paid so highly for it afterward. He simply held her in his arms a moment and breathed into her soft thick hair — as warm as a bed of meadow-moss under a hot mid-day sun, and as alive and vibrant. And as fragrant too! He had never observed that strange, sweet fragrance of a woman's hair when you breathe into it, before. He had never breathed into a woman's hair before. He told Sheilah so. Womanlike she loved being told that she was the first one with whom he had shared this or that experience, however slight. And he could often tell her so, even though she had arrived so late. For never before had he been forced to seek beauty by such circuitous routes. In many things Sheilah held the position of priority with him, due to the restrictions he was obliged to observe.

But in spite of the restrictions, and the mutual acceptance of the fact that they never could be more

than friends, as it is phrased, still their love for each other, hidden though they kept it, slowly and inevitably continued to grow and to expand under the constant warmth of their companionship, as the life hidden inside a shell slowly and inevitably grows and expands under the constant warmth of the robin's breast. The walls of the little front room finally proved too small to hold it. To Sheilah's despair the city itself finally proved too small to hold it.

2

It wasn't, however, until November, nearly six months after the dark night in the hall when Roger had kissed her, that Sheilah arrived at the conclusion that she must eliminate from her otherwise barren life her relationship with him. For a long time she turned her face away from the slow accumulation of evidences that it was having an undesirable effect upon her. She didn't tell even Roger at first. She kept it locked in her heart, like the secret knowledge of a fatal disease she would hide. Silently, fearfully, she watched one ideal of hers after another being attacked by it.

Her pride first became undermined. By the end of the summer she was ready to stoop to all sorts of cheap little tricks and devices in order to see Roger. Her sense of honor, too, was crumbling. After the first few weeks she was able to deceive Laetitia with-

out a qualm. And worse than all, it was incapacitating her as a wife and mother. By September Roger was seldom absent from her thoughts. All during the grim carrying-out of her day's schedule, the possibility of seeing him, or of hearing from him (sometimes he called her by telephone, sometimes wrote to her, sometimes simply passed her house in his car, blew his horn and waved), kept her in a state of constant waiting and expectation. If several days passed with no sign from him, she became sensitive, raw to every sudden sound of bell or horn, or knock, and was a less cheerful and responsive mother, a less cheerful and responsive wife.

Roger did all he could to save her from unnecessary waiting and uncertainty. But there were times, of course, that in spite of all his care and protection Sheilah must be patient and trust him. She did trust him (their honesty with each other had begotten trust), but trusting him wasn't much help to her during the terrible ten days when she didn't hear from him at all, and finally, sick with anxiety, called up his office (she had never called Roger at his office, an instinctive fastidiousness in such matters preventing her from even running the risk of being the cause of possible embarrassment), and was told briefly that Mr. Dallinger was ill with pneumonia, but no further information could be given to strangers.

During the days of the crisis that followed Sheilah was forced to seek a public telephone-booth (for Laetitia chanced to be at home with a cold), call Roger's country house where he still lived on alone, since his mother's death, and beg for bulletins from a trained nurse, who treated the woman with the trembling voice who preferred not to give her name, with insinuating curtness; and finally with a refusal to answer any questions at all, as if she was some one Roger ought to be ashamed of. Roger got into communication with Sheilah as soon as possible, but not until it had been demonstrated to her that no woman should care like that for any man, or for any child, or for any human being whom she could not acknowledge.

'It can't go on,' she told Roger the first time he came to see her after his illness. 'It's disabling me. I'm losing my usefulness. I'm losing my grip on my job. I was worse than no mother when you were so sick. I'm not thinking about anything in the world but you. I'm not caring about anything in the world but you. And that's wrong. That's wasted thought, wasted caring, because I can't have you. At least I *won't* have you,' she brought out savagely.

She had become savage now. Her gentleness had disappeared, even her wistfulness. There were no similes any more, no play any more. There were even fewer caresses, so intense had become her despair.

'Oh, I won't let it ruin my life, and rob me of my pride, and sense of honor, and destroy my will, and eat into my ideals of right and wrong. I *must* get over it. I must. A strong woman would get over it. I must be strong. You must help me, Roger. I mustn't see you. I don't know how I shall be able to live, but we mustn't see each other, Roger. We mustn't even hear from each other. That's the way to get over it, they say. That's the way to try, anyway.'

Roger, filled with despair because of Sheilah's despair, suffering because she suffered, hands tied, helpless to help in any other way, complied.

They didn't see each other, they didn't even hear from each other, for over three weeks. But after the first four or five days of this self-inflicted separation, Sheilah was guilty of haunting the public parking-space, where Roger left his car during office hours. It had suddenly occurred to Sheilah that pneumonia was often followed by a relapse. The gray car with the number she knew so well was proof that Roger was at his work. Moreover, the gray car itself had come to seem so much a part of him that the mere sight of it gratified a little her aching desire. Roger on his part was guilty also of passing Sheilah's house frequently in the evening for the comfort of the glimmer of her lights.

They had agreed to test the separation for two months, but near the end of the third week they

met unexpectedly, late one afternoon, just outside the parking-space where Roger left his car. Sheilah was standing on the sidewalk, beside a lighted shop-window (it was November and dark), waiting for a street-car to take her home. Roger saw her as he turned the corner.

There followed half an hour of such sweet and poignant reunion inside Roger's car, that all Sheilah's firm resolves were swept away. After that, for a brief week or two, she succumbed. Roger came to see her again. And thus it was proved the city wasn't big enough to hold the thing between them that insisted upon maturing.

'One or the other of us must go away,' finally Sheilah told Roger. 'There must be space between us, so that it is impossible for us to see each other.'

'I doubt,' said Roger, 'if even space can keep us apart now, Sheilah.'

'Well, our wills can then,' she replied grimly, 'and space will help.'

She was seated during this conversation beside Roger in his car, drawn up in the black shadow of an empty building. This was the third time since their reunion that Sheilah had met Roger outside the parking-space by the shop window, as if by accident.

'Oh, can't you see,' she burst out now, 'I can't go on seeing you like this, and yet I can't stop seeing you like this or any other way, it appears, so long as

it is possible. One or the other of us must go away.'

'But how, and when, and where?'

'Of course, *you* can't go,' she smiled, 'you'd be miserable and unhappy without your work. Besides, you're too big and important a man here, doing big and important things. If you should go away everybody would wonder and want to know why. But I — I'm nothing — nobody. If I should disappear no one would wonder, or want to know why. It's I who must go away, Roger.'

'Oh, Sheilah, in a little time, with a little patience I can arrange things so that what we feel for each other can be acknowledged. Why do you try to kill so beautiful a thing so insistent upon living?'

'Because other beautiful things would have to die to let it live,' promptly she replied, as she had often before. 'And besides,' bluntly she went on, 'it isn't right, and you know it isn't, and I know it isn't, according to our standards, and because in that case it wouldn't be beautiful, and we wouldn't be happy.'

'Then why can't we go on as we are for a little while?'

'Because it hurts too much. The joy I used to feel in being with you for short periods — seeing you, and talking with you, and touching you just a little — is gone now, swallowed up in a terrible desire to be with you all the time, and entirely.'

He groped for her hand, 'Oh, I know. I know.'

'And I'm afraid,' she went on, 'the desire is doing something to me subconsciously that's not good.'

Twice within the last month the dream about the Chinaman had revisited Sheilah, for the first time since her girlhood, when her instincts had come into opposition with her ideals. Both times the dream had recurred after Sheilah had made a supreme effort to be generous to Felix, in way of expiation for the wrong she felt she had done him in caring for another man.

'I mustn't let Felix become unwelcome to me, must I? And lately it's harder for me to be what I should to him, at times. Do you understand?'

Of course Roger understood. He always understood, although sometimes, as now, with a stab of pain. Of what act of self-sacrifice was not Sheilah capable if it was for a principle? She would do anything for the sake of duty. More, it occurred to him bitterly, than for the sake of love. He murmured something of the sort to her now.

'Oh, Roger,' she replied. 'Does it seem to you I have given you so little?'

'No. No. Forgive me. I know you have given me more, being who and what you are, than most women who give all. It's only that I want all so, and want so very much to make you happy. And I cannot. I cannot. It seems to me all I've done is to bring you unhappiness, Sheilah. I think it would

have been better if I had never come into your life.'

'Oh, don't say that. It isn't true. I'm glad of every moment I've had with you, just as I'm glad of every moment I had with Esther, my baby, who was so beautiful and perfect. She was a hope, an ideal that came true. And so are you. It isn't as if you were leaving me embittered, disillusioned, and disappointed in you, you know. Besides,' she added with a little forced smile, laying her hand on his knee, 'you're making me great, Roger. You're giving me the opportunity to do a big thing — the biggest thing I shall ever do — give you up.' And she pushed him from her with a little gentle shove, and drew her hand away.

3

It didn't prove so easy, after all, for Sheilah to leave Boston as she had implied to Roger. Felix's pay had gradually climbed to an amount he could never hope to earn in a new position, and every cent of it was needed by the growing children. The suggestion from Roger that he help her financially to renounce him, was unthinkable to Sheilah.

'No,' she replied instantly, firmly. 'So long as we care for each other in the way we do, anything mercenary would spoil the beauty.'

And not only was the financial problem a difficulty. Old vines whose roots have become deeply embedded

in the soil, and twisted around the various rocks and difficulties in the paths they have tunneled, do not thrive well when transplanted. Felix even in his youth was never adaptable to new scenes, new people, new demands. It would be a painful experience for Felix to make a fresh start in a strange environment. Moreover, what excuse could she give him for suggesting that he suddenly terminate his relationship with Mr. Fairchild, his employer, when for years she had been emphasizing the importance of strengthening it in every way possible? Oh, perhaps after all she was attempting too drastic a course of action in order to make her renouncement easier.

Other women had been caught as she had been caught, and had been unable to run away. And had conquered. And others, alas, had not conquered! She would always be kind and tolerant after this to the women who had not conquered, held by chains they could not break, to that which constantly lured and tempted them. People who judged and blamed didn't understand the terrific power of propinquity. The very air seemed permeated with the consciousness of Roger's nearness. It was like being tied beneath a tree heavy with fragrant bloom, and attempting to escape its overpowering sweetness.

He might be around any corner. Any automobile that her little Ford crawled up on at the con-

gested crossings, might bear his registration plate. Any late night, after Felix and the children were safely in bed she had only to murmur a number into the telephone receiver to hear his voice; or if she resisted the temptation, he had only to murmur a number to hear hers. She used to lie awake often till after midnight, hoping that he would prove less strong than she, and ignoring their resolutions, as a forest-fire a brook, leap over them, and send her to sleep with the music of his brief good-night singing in her ears. During the month in midsummer when he had been in Newfoundland, fishing, she was aware of the soothing effect of inaccessibility; and as the days had piled up softly upon his absence, conscious of a growing strength in her to resist her desire for him.

Oh, what ought she to do? Run grave risks of uprooting Felix and seek safety in flight? Or run graver risks and remain in the danger-zone? 'What would a woman wiser, stronger, better than I do?' Suddenly, miraculously, it seemed to Sheilah, all doubt and uncertainty were swept away. Her course was made clear!

CHAPTER IV

I

ONE night Felix came home earlier than usual. Sheilah was in the kitchen, preparing the evening meal. She heard his key in the door, and a moment later, glancing into the dining-room, saw him sitting on the end of the couch, all crumpled up.

'Why, what is the matter, Felix?' she exclaimed, going up to him close.

'Send the children out.'

'Run out, children,' quickly Sheilah responded, and then, bending over Felix, 'What is it?'

Had he somehow at last discovered her love for Roger? But how? When? Perhaps — Oh, how unkind, how cruel of fate to have hurt him like this just when she was trying so hard to save him.

Then, 'I've lost my job,' he announced. 'They're cutting down help at the office. I'm through. I'm out.'

'Is that all!' Sheilah exclaimed, and she sat down on the end of the couch beside him and put her hand upon his knee. 'I was afraid —'

'What were you afraid?' Had she suspected what Mr. Fairchild now knew for a fact? He searched her eyes. 'What were you afraid?'

'Why, that something really dreadful had happened,' she laughed.

No, she didn't suspect yet. She couldn't and laugh.

'Losing your job isn't a crime, you know,' she went on lightly. 'We'll find another job somewhere. Perhaps we'll go to another city, to entirely new surroundings far away from here.'

'I'd like to go very far away from here,' said Felix. The farther away from his crime, the better.

'So would I,' she agreed instantly. The farther away from her temptation, the better. 'Why,' she went on, 'it may be the best thing that could have happened. Come, don't feel badly. Please.'

He didn't deserve such kindness. A man like him, who cheated — who stole.

'I'm sorry I've messed your life all up,' he murmured.

She patted his shoulder. 'You haven't! You haven't!' she denied.

She didn't deserve such devotion. A woman like her — unfaithful in everything but act.

They sat silently for a minute each with a buried secret.

'He must never know,' thought Sheilah.

'She must never know,' thought Felix.

2

It had been his chief thought ever since his connection with the missing bond had been discovered. Sheilah must never know.

'You won't tell my wife, will you?' he had begged, three days ago, when he had been summoned into Mr. Fairchild's private office. 'Do anything to me. I don't care. I don't count. But, oh, please don't let her know.'

Mr. Fairchild had gazed with sickening pity upon Felix. He hadn't even suspected him in connection with the missing bond until the afternoon before. He had known the bond was missing. He had known it for over a year. The lawyer who made out his tax-returns had informed him last January. Mr. Fairchild had told the lawyer it would probably turn up somewhere, in some corner in his desk, or at home in a forgotten drawer. The lawyer, however, reported the missing bond and one day, after long watching, from out of a cloudless sky, there appeared a homing coupon. Within a few days after its return the bond had been traced to the Jew who had sold Felix his Ford a year and a half ago.

Mr. Fairchild had looked very grave when he was told the facts, and as soon as he was alone, he had pressed a button and sent for Felix. There would be some explanation, surely. But Felix had simply bowed his head, and before Mr. Fairchild had

finished his story had hastened to admit his guilt.

‘Yes. I did it. I took it. But my wife doesn’t know. Don’t let her know.’ He didn’t even try to defend his act.

‘But you can’t possibly remain in my employ,’ Mr. Fairchild had replied. ‘You’ve ruined my confidence absolutely. There’s no place for you here after this.’

‘Of course. I’ll go. Only Sheilah, my wife mustn’t know why.’

‘But you’re guilty of a crime. Don’t you know the punishment for an act like yours is imprisonment? Don’t you know ——’ Mr. Fairchild did not spare Felix.

Felix sat cowed and silent under his merciless arraignment, not stirring a muscle, staring at the floor. Afterward, ‘Yes, I know,’ he said, ‘but please don’t tell my wife. It will be worse than prison for Sheilah if she finds out. You see she believes things like this are inherited, and we’ve got three children. Oh, Mr. Fairchild, have my children got to know too? Laetitia is away at a boarding-school now, making new friends, but if she knows what kind of a father she’s got —— And the boys — our two boys — all their lives they’ll know what sort I was, and what they’ve got in their blood. I never took anything before. Why, if Sheilah knew that I —— Oh, won’t you please ——’ Suddenly he broke down, burying his face in his hands.

Mr. Fairchild got up and walked over to the window, and stood staring out a moment. He had a daughter at home and a boy, and a wife. 'Pull yourself together,' he said roughly to Felix, over his shoulder, and strode over toward the door. 'I'll be back in five or ten minutes. You stay here and get yourself into shape.'

When he returned his frown was deeper, his manner ever more stern and severe. He spoke with the irritability of a man acting against his better judgment.

'Can you pay this money back?' he demanded brusquely.

Felix shook his head, 'I don't know how. It's all gone but a little over fifty dollars.'

'Haven't you anything put away in the bank?'

'A little, but Sheilah is in charge of that. But,' timidly he suggested, 'I could give you my note, couldn't I?'

'And what as security?' Mr. Fairchild inquired scathingly — scathingly because there was a terrific combat taking place within him, between his determination to be just, and a desire to help a fellow-creature in distress.

'I don't know. I haven't any property of my own. Sheilah has always known so much more about money affairs. Once, though, I took out a life-insurance policy. A smooth-talking sort of fellow got

me to do it. I never told Sheilah because I was afraid perhaps she'd think I'd been foolish. You see, I was already carrying one policy made out to her.'

'And what sort of a policy is this other?'

'I don't know exactly. But a thousand dollars is to be paid me when I'm a certain age, the man said. Do you think perhaps I could give you that as security?'

'Bring it in, and I'll see. But you can't get off scot-free, understand. A man can't commit an act like yours without paying for it. And it's my duty to see that you do it, one way or another,' he said sternly. 'I haven't decided yet what I shall do. I'll talk it over with the president of our company tonight, and see what his idea is, and let you know when I make up my mind. You'd better get back to your work now.'

There followed three torturing days for Felix. He tried to keep out of Sheilah's presence as much as possible, and Sheilah, absorbed with her own problems, did not observe him closely.

Mr. Fairchild summoned Felix into his office on the third afternoon. He told him curtly that he would accept the insurance policy as collateral on his note, and the sooner Felix terminated his services now, the better, he thought.

'You mean,' exclaimed Felix, 'you won't tell?'

'I suppose that's what I mean,' retorted Mr.

Fairchild, in a tone of annoyance, as if the acknowledgment was extremely repugnant to him. 'I don't approve of it. It's against my principles.'

'And if Sheilah should come and want to know why I left ——'

'We're cutting down help anyway, as it happens.'

'I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Fairchild.'

'I don't want your thanks,' snapped Mr. Fairchild.

3

But Sheilah didn't go to Mr. Fairchild to know why Felix left.

'You awake, Felix?' she called softly during the dark hours of an early dawn a few days later.

'Yes, I'm awake,' he replied from his bed a few feet away.

'How would you like to go up and help your father, now that you're looking for something new to do?'

'You mean for us to go up and live in Terry?'

'Yes, that's what I was thinking.'

'And for me to help father on the place? Father spends most of his time with his hens and in his garden now.'

'Well, there is a box-factory in Terry. You could probably get work there, and help your father on the place besides. And possibly,' she added, 'since

your mother has had her stroke, she wouldn't mind a little help from *me*.'

'You mean for us to go and live with my folks?'

'Well, the house is plenty big enough.'

'You always said you wanted the children near the advantages of a city.'

'Laetitia and Roddie will be away at school. There will be only Phillip.'

'And you yourself have always wanted to be near a city.'

'Well, I want to get away from it, now. And you said you did, Felix.'

'Well, not so bad as all that! Oh, don't be afraid. Don't worry. Don't think you've got to go and live with my folks. I hope I won't bring you down to that! I haven't said anything about it because I wanted to be sure first, but I think we can go right on living here. Mr. Fairchild is being very kind to me, and he called me up when you were out last night, and told me about a job right here. I'm going to see the man to-morrow and talk things over with him.'

'And *I'm* going to Terry to see your mother and father to-morrow, and talk things over with *them*,' calmly Sheilah announced. 'I'm afraid you'll have to tell Mr. Fairchild you're not interested, Felix, because your wife has other plans.'

CHAPTER V

I

SHEILAH walked along the country road carrying a sheaf of flaming leaves. It was late October. The air was full of the smell of fall — apples and wild grapes, fallen leaves, smouldering fires — and full too this afternoon of a golden glow that tinged the rolling pastures, distant hills, and sky beyond, as if the sun was shining through amber glass. Sheilah breathed deep of the clear, apricot-colored air, rich and thick and sparkling like a liqueur, she thought, or some rare nectar, distilled from many fruits — the essence of summer, the loveliness of all the days from May to October, condensed and concentrated.

There was no wind stirring. She stopped beneath a motionless beech tree for a moment, and gazed up into its canary-yellow foliage. Several of the leaves floated languidly down upon her, and made tiny soft sounds as they touched the ground. A little bird of some sort chirped twice on a hidden branch. A distant chipmunk chattered. Sheilah smiled. Only one whose heart is very calm and quiet can hear such little sounds. As she swung down the hill that led into the town she observed the various roadside signs and symbols of the New England autumn — piles

of orange-colored pumpkins on the back porch of almost every house she passed, mounds of discarded apples beneath the bared branches of the orchards, Indian wigwams in place of the waving cornfields.

Ten minutes later, walking along the main street of the town, beneath the tawny elm trees, Sheilah stopped several times to speak to neighbors whom she met (this was her second autumn in Terry, Vermont), passing on each time with a deepening smile. Little sounds beneath a tree, simple sights along a road-way, homely expressions of friendliness from neighbors, all gave pleasure to Sheilah now.

She turned in at a gateway half a dozen houses beyond the first elm tree of the long colonnade, and approached a house painted ginger-snap brown of ugly, nondescript architecture. It had a steep A roof facing the street, a front door off the center, and a bay-window beside the front door. Sheilah saw only the glorious garland of scarlet woodbine festooned over the front door as she walked up the path.

'I'm home, Mother,' she called cheerfully up the front stairs as she shoved open the front door.

She laid down her autumn leaves for a moment on one of the morris-chairs crowded into the sitting-room at the left of the door (there were six morris-chairs in all dispersed through the brown house. Felix's mother had had a fancy for morris-chairs),

and went into the kitchen to get a pitcher of water for the leaves before taking them upstairs to the invalid.

Sheilah liked the kitchen. There were cupboards, hand-grained in golden brown along one side of the room; two rush-bottomed maple chairs she had found in the loft of the barn; a table with a red cloth; and a low, legless, unornamented stove squatting on the floor like a comfortable old cat, its kettle softly purring.

Sheilah ran upstairs with her leaves and brought into the sick-room not only her flame of color, but a smile besides, and a bright, 'I'm going to feed the hens now. I'll turn your chair so you can see me.'

Felix's mother smiled at her. 'You're a good girl, Sheilah,' she murmured, with a significant thickness in her speech.

Sheilah leaned and kissed the invalid gratefully on her forehead.

A few minutes later, standing amidst a fluttering flock of feathery white leghorns, coral-tipped, sprinkling golden nuggets amidst them, she looked up and waved gayly at Felix's mother.

2

When she returned to the house she took off her hat and coat — rough, brown, practical affairs, and hung them in a closet off the kitchen, then lifted her

head and listened, glancing toward the woodshed. The door was ajar.

‘Phillip, is that you?’

‘Yes,’ a boy’s voice replied, and Phillip appeared in the doorway, frail, pale, as he used to be — he would always be frail and pale — but smiling.

Phillip had a strangely sweet smile, Sheilah had come to think, deep and still and abiding, as if there was some secret source of joy in him no one knew about but himself. Only lessons that were too hard for him could contort Phillip’s smile into the anguished expression of a hunted animal. Sheilah had decided to preserve Phillip’s smile at whatever cost. He still attended school, but she chafed no longer at his slow progress, nor allowed his teachers to prod or urge him.

‘School out so soon?’ she smiled.

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘and I’m going over to the shop to help Father now.’

He had a board under one arm, and a saw. Phillip very often had a board under one arm, and some carpenter’s tool or other. Sheilah looked at him now, standing in the glow of the late afternoon sunshine, his face alight with that deep smile of his, and was suddenly reminded of another boy, often pictured by artists, with a board under one arm and a carpenter’s tool. Oh, the carpenter’s craft was not one to be despised!

She crossed the kitchen, put both hands on Phillip's shoulders and said quietly, 'You're going to be a wonderful carpenter some day, Phillip.'

'Yes,' he agreed confidently, 'just like Father.'

Felix was a carpenter now, working daily in the box-factory near by. Phillip was always saying he wanted to be like his father, and following him closely about like a dog his master. Phillip's devotion to his father, like his smile, was deep and abiding. And Sheilah was as anxious to preserve it. It seemed to her as if Phillip's little hot coal of love for Felix must compensate a little for all she had failed to give him.

'Were there any letters?' she now inquired.

Phillip usually stopped at the post-office on his way home from school.

'Yes,' he replied. 'I forgot. Three. For you.'

Phillip could read handwriting now. Sheilah usually had him tell her whom the letters were for, and when the postmarks were clear enough, from what city they were mailed. But to-day she was too eager to stop for the spelling lesson. It was Tuesday. Laetitia's and Roddie's Sunday letters came on Tuesday.

Laetitia was in college now. Sheilah's early fears about Laetitia, and her tendency toward cheapness in taste and manners, had disappeared. A desire for an education, and the fineness that goes with it, had

been instilled in Laetitia when she was at boarding-school, under the soft, steady influence of a very wise and a very lovely head-mistress.

Also Sheilah's graver fears about Roddie were disappearing. Roddie was at a boarding-school where there was an equally wise head-master. 'Your boy is not a scholar,' he had written not long ago. 'I do not advise college for him. But you have reason to be proud of him. He is a hard, conscientious, and honest worker.'

How Sheilah had treasured that word 'honest'! With what joy she had shown it to Felix!

3

As soon as she was alone she drew up a chair close to the kitchen table and read her letters. First Laetitia's, then Roddie's, smiling fondly as she scanned the pages, unconsciously laughing out loud, now and then. No woman unconsciously laughs out loud if her heart is aching very hard; nor hums to herself over her work, as Sheilah caught herself doing often here in this kind, homely kitchen. Her life in Terry was dull, drab, monotonous, but the dullness and drabness and monotony had covered her, comforted her, and slowly healed — well, anyway, *almost* healed. Not entirely, she supposed, or she wouldn't have dreaded opening her third letter. It was from Cicely. Every time Cicely wrote to Sheilah now, she mentioned Roger Dallinger.

Cicely had returned from Europe. She had been in Wallbridge for nearly two years. She still acted as Sheilah's fairy godmother. But for Cicely, Roddie and Laetitia could not both be away at school at once. Cicely wrote to Sheilah regularly, every two weeks or so.

It appeared from her letters that she was seeing a great deal of Roger. He was running up to Wallbridge almost every week-end. Well, was not that as it should be? Roger had intended to marry Cicely once. He had told Sheilah about it. And Sheilah was well aware now that Cicely had always loved Roger. 'I ought to be glad he's going to see her,' Sheilah told herself over and over again. 'I want him to be happy, don't I? At least I *ought* to want him to be happy. And, anyway, it was I who suggested that he go and see Cicely. I must remember that.'

She opened Cicely's letter with straightened shoulders, steeling herself against the reference she feared. Cicely had bought a new horse, she read on the third page, and Roger (ah! here it was as usual) had been good enough to exercise him for her over the last week-end. They had had a glorious ride together. Did Sheilah remember the high hill just beyond the golf club? They had ridden to the top of that hill and had stopped their horses a moment beneath the pine trees that crowned it — and listened

to the music of the wind in their needles. Something stabbed Sheilah sharply at that. Oh, she wished Cicely wouldn't write her any more.

She arose from the table, and began her preliminary preparations for supper, but she did not hum. If she had read Roddie's and Laetitia's letters after Cicely's she would not have laughed out loud. Always Cicely's references to Roger broke through the smooth surface of her serenity like this, and riled the quieted waters underneath.

There was no reason of course for Roger to be constant to her. But she had thought that like herself, perhaps he would not escape constancy. It hurt her terribly that he could so quickly share experiences with another woman that she had believed were sacred to herself alone. It robbed her renunciation of much of its beauty and glory. 'Oh, well,' she shrugged and sighed. A man's constancy, she guessed, even Roger's, depended upon propinquity. Just as well to find it out. Her cure would prove more permanent, the sooner she stopped idealizing Roger. Anyhow, what difference did it make to her now, what he did, whom he saw? She was happy, wasn't she?

'Yes, I am happy.' Stoically she assured herself and mechanically, with the efficiency of long practice, turned her mind to happy subjects — the children all doing so well, Felix more contented than he

had ever been in his life before, the revelation that there was much to love in his parents, and the immediate pleasure of mixing a fresh johnny-cake for supper.

CHAPTER VI

I

THAT evening Felix and his father went to a political rally in the town hall. After Sheilah had tucked Phillip into bed, also Felix's mother, and called to each 'good-night,' she went to her own bedroom and closed the door. On a high shelf in her closet, inside a box, where she kept woolen things in camphor-balls, there was a packet of letters from Roger, hidden in the folds of an old India shawl of her grandmother's. Sheilah did not allow herself to read these letters often, but she felt in great need to-night of some actual proof that she hadn't run away from an unreality, a dream of her own romantic making. They were beautiful letters, a dozen or more, written during her first six months in Terry.

When Sheilah and Roger had separated they had agreed not to write to each other, but Roger had ignored the pact. How Sheilah had loved him for ignoring it, and with what joy she had received each testimony of his thought of her. She had not answered the letters. But she had allowed them to continue — weakly allowed them to continue, she supposed. She knew the effect of the arrival of a letter from Roger, the immediate mounting of her spirits, was not well for her. It was like secretly drinking

a stimulant which she had run away to Terry in order to forego. Finally she cut off the supply. Roger hastened the step.

Sheilah's silence became unendurable to him. He had no idea how she was situated in Terry. Whether or not she had found the peace she had gone to seek, whether or not she was even well. One day Sheilah received a note from Roger, mailed from a near-by town, announcing that he was driving through Terry by automobile the next afternoon, and would stop for an hour and see how she was.

Sheilah did not dare break the spell of their separation. To see Roger even for an hour would mean perhaps going through all the early longing and loneliness again. Moreover, her determination to make her renunciation complete and final, had mounted by that time to a state of almost ecstatic fervor.

When Roger arrived at the brown house Sheilah was miles away, fiercely tramping a country road, and fighting a desire to turn and run back before it was too late. Phillip, seated on the brown doorstep, alone awaited Roger. His mother was away for the day, he told Roger when he came, and here was a letter she had written him.

Roger read it later in the stuffy lobby of the little commercial hotel by the railroad station, biting his under lip, his heart tumultuous with disappointment and defeat. He had ridden over three hundred miles

for an hour's meeting with Sheilah. He had lain awake countless hours thinking of the meeting.

Sheilah's letter was not long. But it said a great deal. She was quite well. Their separation was proving very successful. She had found peace of mind and happiness in Terry beyond her hopes, and he could best help her by never trying to see her again. It only made things more difficult. Also he must not write to her any more. It was better for her new peace and happiness not to be disturbed by the expectation of a message from him. And by the way, did he know that Cicely Morgan was at home again, and why didn't he go and see her as he used to go years ago? There was more than one road to happiness, she had discovered.

The note hurt Roger. He hardly recognized Sheilah in it, it was so brief and impersonal. And how could she make that reference to Cicely? Had she indeed recovered? So soon? Was her desire for him then so dependent upon seeing him? The same doubts that later assailed Sheilah, gripped Roger all the three hundred miles back to Boston over the dark night roads.

2

Sheilah lifted the box down from the closet shelf and placed it on the bed. She raised the cover and ran her hand into the middle fold of the shawl. The

letters were not there! She picked up the shawl. They were underneath it instead of inside. Quickly she carried them across the room and sat down, close to the kerosene lamp. The ribbon that bound them was tied as usual in a small neat bow-knot. She untied it. The letters fell apart in her lap. They were without envelopes and bore no dates, but Sheilah knew their order by heart, and always kept them in the same sequence. The sequence was undisturbed.

Could she have put the letters underneath the shawl herself? No. She was always so careful with them. Who could have touched the precious packet? No one ever went to her closet. It was the one space in the world that was hers alone. Then, mercifully it flashed over her that possibly old Mrs. O'Connor, the Irishwoman who came twice a week to clean, might have been more thorough than usual, and disturbed the box, knocked it down, or even looked inside out of curiosity. It wouldn't matter if old Mrs. O'Connor had found the letters. She couldn't read or write.

The next day Mrs. O'Connor, questioned by Sheilah as to whether or not she had cleaned her closet the last time she had swept the room, assured her particular mistress that 'sure she had, and good and thorough, too.' Mrs. O'Connor didn't consider it a lie. She had mopped the closet floor, which was more than was her custom.

Sheilah was satisfied. But it was a warning. She burned the letters that night. They were better out of existence.

3

It was not until after Roger's futile trip to Terry that he became convinced that Sheilah was lost to him forever. He was surprised at the way it took hold of him. While she was gradually recovering from the effects of their relationship, acquiring peace and happiness in her retreat, he was possessed by a gnawing hunger that seemed to increase. He became restless and ill at ease, dreaded long quiet evenings alone, idle week-ends, unoccupied hours following meals, or any task just finished. Books even palled upon him, and he found it difficult to concentrate on the long conversations of his men friends at his club.

He worked hard and feverishly each day at his office, as early and late as possible, and then found himself desiring some form of entertainment in the evening that would engross him until he was so tired he could lose himself in sleep. It had been a comfort to write to Sheilah when she first went away, even though she didn't reply, but now she had robbed him of even that. She might as well be dead as far as he was concerned. In fact, their separation seemed to him sometimes worse than as if she

were dead. For if she were in trouble, sick, or unhappy he would know nothing of it, and could not help her.

It was not because of Sheilah's suggestion that Roger first called up Cicely Morgan, and asked if he could run up and see her. It was because Cicely was the nearest he could get to Sheilah. Roger found immediate balm in talking to Cicely. Much of their conversation the first evening he called on her centered about Sheilah. He learned many little details and precious trivialities about her life in Terry. Cicely was very generous to him that night; read him parts of a recent letter from Sheilah; showed him a snapshot of her among her 'fluttering white leg-horns'; described the brown house in detail (for she had stopped to see Sheilah once on a motor-trip); smiling kindly, tolerantly, upon him the while, as if she understood his longing, as indeed she did. For had she not longed also?

The truth was Cicely found strange delight in satisfying Roger. At last she possessed something he wanted, something no one else could give him, and something he repeatedly and persistently sought. She was not the fire, only the grate. Not the wine, only the cup. But she was satisfied. She had waited long. To be his confidante was better than nothing.

Roger came nearly every week-end finally, often remaining overnight at her house as her guest. They

rode and tramped together daytimes, and sat before glowing fires in the evening, always talking for the first hour before the fire about Sheilah and the latest news from her. Roger came to know Sheilah's three children intimately, and her hopes and anxieties in regard to each. Later he and Cicely discussed books and plays, and music, which they both loved, and politics occasionally. Cicely had an excellent mind. She was still a very lovely woman. And a very much wiser one. If jealousy still pricked her (and it did when Roger's eyes kindled so over Sheilah's name) she kept it well hidden, simply smiling, offering him more wine from her cup, intoxicating him with conversation about another woman. But hers was the hand that lay within reach.

CHAPTER VII

I

ONE afternoon Phillip brought home a letter for his father. The address was typewritten. It had been posted in Boston. Felix seldom received any mail, except advertisements and bills occasionally.

Sheilah placed the letter on the kitchen shelf. It was once her custom to open Felix's mail herself, but since Roger's advent, she had made a point with Felix and the children, of the importance of respecting the privacy of any sealed message.

Luckily Felix was alone when he opened his letter, and so had an opportunity to devise some sort of explanation to give to Sheilah. He told her when he joined her at supper later, that the agent who had sold his doll-house several years ago, had had an inquiry for another doll-house, and he guessed he'd better run down to Boston in a day or two and see him about it, though probably it would prove a wild-goose chase. Felix still worked at his bench evenings. It was set up in a corner of the dining-room here in the brown house, too.

In reality Felix's letter was from Mr. Bullard, the president of the concern where he had been employed by Mr. Fairchild for so many years. The first sentence of the letter referred to Mr. Fairchild's

death. Felix hadn't even heard of it! He didn't read the Boston papers thoroughly. Mr. Fairchild had died last October (it was January now) and Mr. Bullard was the executor of his estate. There had been found, among Mr. Fairchild's papers, a demand note of Felix's for a thousand dollars. There was an insurance policy as collateral on this note, but it was not due to be paid for half a dozen years yet, except in the event of Felix's death. Mr. Bullard was anxious to settle the estate as soon as possible, as he was leaving in a few weeks for a year's travel in Europe. Therefore he trusted it would be convenient for Felix to pay the small amount of the note without delay.

2

'But I can't pay it any easier now than I could three years ago,' Felix told Mr. Bullard several days later, closeted in his private office.

Mr. Bullard was a short, erect, closely knit man, with the quick, clipped, self-confident speech and manner of a very busy and successful one. A hard, compact little unit of efficiency and great productive power. No superfluous inches, no superfluous pounds, no superfluous words or motions — or emotions either. Felix trembled before him.

'I am familiar with the circumstances of this loan,' he said to Felix, looking at him through his clear,

crystal eye-glasses with significant sharpness. 'I am the only one Mr. Fairchild took into his confidence in regard to that unfortunate affair of yours. I didn't approve of his policy in the matter. From the start I told him I thought your wife should be told the truth, and both of you clear up the indebtedness and start with a clean slate. Your wife has money, or recourse to it. I happen to know, because your boy is attending the same private school as my own and it isn't an inexpensive one.'

'But it will be just as bad for my wife to know now what I did, as it was a while ago — more, because now she'd feel ——'

Mr. Bullard interrupted Felix with a frown. 'I haven't time to discuss your wife's feelings. They really aren't my affair. This estate *is* my affair. All I ask is for you to see to it that I have that note of yours paid in full, within the next three weeks.'

'But don't you see I can't pay it without telling my wife, and she ——'

'Sorry, Nawn, but I really haven't time to discuss the matter. There's another man waiting for me.'

'But if I —— Could I ask you one more question?'

'As briefly as possible, please.'

'Well, if I did — if I could raise the money somehow, outside, I mean, borrow it from some one, get it to you some way, without telling my wife, would you feel it your duty to tell her yourself?'

'Tell her? Why should I?'

'Well, just because you think she ought to know.'

'Of course I wouldn't tell her,' he laughed with a touch of impatience in his voice.

'Never?'

'Why certainly not! I've far too much to do, Nawn, than to go out of my way to interfere in other people's private affairs. That's *your* business. All I want is for you to pay that note as soon as possible, so I can get away on my trip.' He leaned and pressed a button. 'It will be much better for you, too, believe me — the whole affair all cleared up and off your conscience, and your insurance policy back in your own possession again.'

A private secretary appeared.

Felix stood up.

'Well, good-bye.' Mr. Bullard smiled at him genially. 'And good-luck. I guess we understand each other now.'

3

Felix walked slowly out of Mr. Bullard's office. He had taken a single bedroom in an inexpensive hotel back of the State House. He made his way back to that bedroom along various surface, subway, and elevated tracks, plodding the last half-mile on foot across the Boston Common — gray, dank, unbeautiful, with its patches of snow-like mould — overrun

with bold, scurrying squirrels, some of them furless like rats.

It was an inside bedroom, dim as early dawn all day long. Felix groped his way to the single electric fixture beside the chiffonier, and turned the button of the shadeless bulb. A dim red worm of electric wire vied with the bit of white daylight that sifted into the room through the single window by way of an airshaft. Felix standing close to the electric-light bulb produced a letter from his inside pocket. It was the same letter Sheilah had placed on the kitchen shelf three days ago. He opened it, and gazed at it long and fixedly.

‘Except in the event of your death.’

Those words alone jumped out at him and gripped him, as they had three days ago, only they gripped harder now. Gosh! Had he the courage?

If only he didn't have to do it himself! If only it could just *happen*, somehow. Felix still believed there was a heaven and hell, in some form or other, as punishment or reward for what one did in this life. And he had always been taught that putting an end to things one's self was about the worst sin a man could commit. Well, wasn't he willing to commit the worst sin and suffer the consequences to save Sheilah? He'd been willing to go to hell for her when he joined the army. Wasn't he still willing? Of course she mustn't suspect. He must see to it

that there was no danger of branding her with an act even worse than stealing. There mustn't be a trace of a motive left behind. Better destroy Mr. Bullard's letter immediately. He tore it slowly into tiny bits, and then burned them in the bowl on the washstand.

Afterward he turned off the light and went over to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. Oh, my! Wasn't there *some* other way? Slowly, painstakingly, he proceeded again for the hundredth time, to pursue all the old paths of possible escape, although he already knew they ended in blank walls. He had no friend from whom he could borrow a thousand dollars. His father had no such amount to spare, and if he had, his father might tell Sheilah. There was the same grave risk with Gretchen's husband. Of course banks lent money, if you had property for collateral, but the insurance policy was the only property Felix owned in the world. He couldn't get the whole thousand on that, could he, and Mr. Bullard wanted it all. He wished he dared go to a lawyer and ask him if he had to pay it all. But he was afraid of lawyers. They get you to tell them things you don't want to sometimes. No, it wasn't safe to ask anybody to advise him. Well, he didn't need any one to advise him not to tell Sheilah, in spite of what Mr. Bullard said.

Sheilah seemed so much happier lately. The chil-

dren were turning out so much better than she'd been afraid, and since she'd come to live with his folks, she appeared to be more reconciled to their inheritance. She didn't seem even to object very much to Phillip's always saying that he wanted to be like his father. But if she knew his father was a criminal she wouldn't want to hear Phillip say it *once*. If she knew what her children's father really was, it would stop her humming forever. Felix had heard Sheilah humming over her work many times this last year — a low, throaty sound, beautiful, he thought. Like purring. The only way to keep Sheilah humming was to make that insurance policy payable to Mr. Bullard within the next three weeks. Mr. Bullard had assured him he wouldn't tell Sheilah. All Mr. Bullard wanted was the thousand dollars so he could clear up the estate and get away to Europe. Yes, if Felix could just 'slip out,' somehow, within the next fortnight in some natural, normal way, like pneumonia, or a railroad accident, his crime would be wiped out forever. And Sheilah would be safe forever. And free forever, too.

Suddenly Felix stood. Gosh! he hadn't thought of that till now. He had been ransacking his brain since last October, trying to find a way to give Sheilah her freedom without telling her he had found Roger Dallinger's letters.

Felix had run across the letters by chance one Sunday afternoon, when he had been left alone in charge of his mother. The invalid had asked him to get a certain sweater of Sheilah's to put over her shoulders. She told Felix she thought Sheilah kept it in a drawer in her closet. Felix opened every drawer, and finally every box in the closet (the invalid insisting no other sweater would do) before he found the desired article hanging over the back of a chair in his mother's room.

Later he went back to Sheilah's closet, and carefully replaced everything he had disarranged. It was then that he found the packet of letters. He didn't read them all — only the first two or three, because he was afraid Sheilah might return unexpectedly. He tied them up just as he had found them, in the same order with the same small bow-knot, and laid them back where he supposed they had lain before — underneath the India shawl.

The full truth had dawned upon Felix for the first time that afternoon. Of course he had known Roger Dallinger and Sheilah liked each other. But he supposed it was just as friends. Felix was painfully aware of his own shortcomings, and of how miserably he had failed to give Sheilah what she ought to have. It had seemed to him ungenerous to begrudge her the pleasure she got in the companionship of a man

like Roger Dallinger. But he didn't suppose they loved each other. The letters, however, left him in no doubt. So that was why Sheilah had wanted to come to Terry — to run away from the man she loved, and to be true to the man she didn't love. And had never loved, he guessed — no, he *knew*. He had always known Sheilah had married him just out of kindness of heart. He ought never to have allowed it. He'd been a drag, and a weight on her all her life. Roger Dallinger was the sort of man to have married her and made her happy. And he wanted to marry her and make her happy now. The letters said so.

Knowing Sheilah, loving Sheilah, Felix was very careful not to let her guess by word or look that he had discovered her secret. It would hurt her terribly if she ever knew she had hurt him so. Buried in Felix beneath his rough, crude exterior there was a fine and delicate perception. If ever he gave Sheilah her freedom it must be without her knowledge of his motive. He hadn't seen how it could be accomplished until to-day. But now suddenly it was clear. Two birds killed with one stone — two birds of prey menacing Sheilah's happiness.

CHAPTER VIII

I

ROGER and Cicely had just finished dinner. Cicely led the way into what used to be called her father's den, when Roger first came to see her — leather-furnished, leather-walled then, studded with many brass-headed upholstery tacks, but now known as 'the book-room,' lined to the ceiling with Cicely's own long, slow accumulation of the most beautiful editions of the most beautiful things that have ever been expressed in print. And all within an arm's length, or an easy step or two, of the two low, soft-cushioned chairs, drawn up before the mantelless fireplace over which hung a single oil painting, the only interruption in the solid phalanx of books, except for the low narrow door (maple like the rest of the wood-work, rubbed to dark gold like an old saddle) and two windows.

The two windows were hung in purple velvet, the color of Concord grapes their bloom untouched; the two low armchairs and a couch near by, covered in raspberry red. There were logs burning now in the fireplace. The books in their many-colored bindings glowed in their gold settings like old jewels, and blended with amazing harmony with the exotic

purple and red. 'Charming! Like a salpiglossis!' Roger had exclaimed the first time he had seen the room in the firelight. Cicely had felt fully repaid for all her pains. Roger's praise was very dear to her.

A similar metamorphosis had taken place in every room in the house. The typical living-room of the nineties, over-furnished with armchairs and sofas upholstered and tufted, overhung with oil-paintings framed in heavy gilt, over-carpeted with oriental rugs laid on top of padded Wilton, was now as clean and chaste as a trimmed forest; its bare waxed floors, with only an occasional rug here and there, dimly reflecting the slender ankles of a duck-footed table, the delicate legs of a Sheraton sofa, and other lovely tapering shadows of old forms and shapes, undraped, uncovered, sparsely distributed. There was little upholstered furniture in the room. One saw through the open backs of old chairs, space beyond, and vistas. But it was a cool, formal room. Cicely preferred the warm purple and red to-night, and the intimacy of the closely crowding books, and two armchairs.

Beside one of the armchairs there was a low table upon which had already been placed cigarettes and a tray with coffee. Cicely sat down in the chair close beside the low table. Roger sat down in the chair close beside hers. The evening paper, carefully unfolded had, as usual, been placed upon the arm of

Roger's chair. Roger picked up the paper. But he laid it aside in a moment to receive from Cicely's white hand, her wrist braceleted in emerald and diamonds to-night, a bit of dark steaming coffee in a small gold-leafed cup.

As their eyes met he smiled and said, 'This is rather nice, isn't it?'

Rather nice? It was heaven to Cicely.

The butler brought in liqueurs later. The heat of the burning logs; the cold of the ground ice in the tiny crystal glass; the sharp, permeating fragrance of the smooth, thick, emerald essence; and the presence of a lovely woman, whom the years had not robbed yet of her charm, close beside Roger — yes, really rather nice!

Roger had arrived in Wallbridge in the late afternoon. He had ridden hard for an hour and a half a horse that required constant mastering; had bathed and changed with luxurious leisure in luxurious surroundings; dined well, a decanter of fine old Sherry by his elbow; talked well (there was no woman of his acquaintance who could talk more intelligently than Cicely); and now this delicious sense of relaxation of body and of brain. And of will-power, too, it occurred to him, as he stretched out his hand a little later and placed it over the diamond and emerald bracelet near by.

At first Roger had combated the increasing consolation he found himself feeling in the nearness of a woman who was not Sheilah. But finally he concluded it was but another proof of the intensity of his love for her. Before Sheilah's advent his desires, as far as women were concerned, were well under control. She awoke them, excited them, and then went away, and left them unsatisfied. It was the absent and forever-forbidden Sheilah he groped for in Cicely, when he placed his hand upon her wrist and felt the warm, smooth, feminine flesh beneath his fingers.

He was fully aware of the significance to Cicely of his gesture. He had not decided to commit himself to her to-night, however. That was the detail in which his will-power slipped a little. But why not to-night? Why postpone it? For many weeks now he had been arriving at the conclusion that he would follow Sheilah's suggestion, and seek happiness where he had sought it many years ago.

He and Cicely were well suited. He admired her brain, took keen pleasure in her unerring good taste and fine discernment. He was an excellent audience for her finished performances as a hostess. And they had many tastes in common. Both liked interesting people, interesting conversation, good food, good wine, good horses, music, books, and, not least of all,

Sheilah. Cicely had often told him, with eyes that shone, that she loved Sheilah. It was, in fact, her love for Sheilah that first stirred again Roger's ardor for Cicely.

Moreover, if he should marry Cicely he would be able to help Sheilah. His income had increased to a depressing amount (depressing as compared to the happiness it gave him) in the last few years. Cicely's income had diminished since her father's death, and enough for her to think twice, now, before buying another horse, or a new automobile. Married to Cicely, he would be allowed to share her burden of the education of Sheilah's children, which Cicely had made her responsibility. What joy it would give him to send Laetitia abroad next summer with a chaperon; and Roddie to Antioch College next fall, as Cicely had once suggested; and possibly — possibly, if Cicely thought well of it, together they could provide a more fitting home for Sheilah and her children to live in.

The vision of the ugly, narrow brown house kept returning to Roger, with unpleasant vividness. What if he could build her a house, sometime, of her own — broad and spreading; with low, gracious lines; white with dark green blinds; in Terry if that was where she would be happiest; and surround her with beauty and comfort. And then — exciting possibility — drop in on her sometimes (with Cicely,

of course) and see with his own two eyes if she were well and happy. Exchange a casual word or two, a smile, a good-night, a good-morning. And sometimes, might she not sleep beneath *his* roof? Already, twice, since she had moved to Terry, she had spent several days with Cicely in Wallbridge. By marrying Cicely he would become at least an acquaintance of Sheilah's. By putting his arms around one woman, he could reach out and touch another with the tips of his fingers. A makeshift — yes. But better than void, than blankness.

It wasn't unfair to Cicely. He was not immune to her magnetism. There had always been a subtle quality about her that drew him, that still drew him. Alone with her before an open fire, after exercise, and food, and a little wine, he felt of late a very poignant attraction. Oh, he could satisfy Cicely!

To-night as his hand encircled her wrist he made a sudden decision. He would ask Cicely to marry him as soon as the telephone in the hall stopped ringing.

3

Cicely made no immediate response to the touch of Roger's hand upon her wrist, steadfastly keeping her eyes upon the burning logs in front of her, not stirring a muscle for a moment, for fear she would betray her violent inner agitation. Intuitively she

was aware that at last the moment had arrived, for which she had been waiting for many years.

All the fall and winter she had observed an increasing tenderness in Roger's manner toward her. More and more often she had caught the unmistakable signs of his consciousness of her physical presence — a peculiar intensifying of the glow in his eyes, and slow deepening of his color — fleeting, like cloud-shadows, that used to come and go only when he was talking of Sheilah, but now frequently when Sheilah's name hadn't been mentioned for hours.

Cicely was aware that Roger had loved Sheilah. He hadn't told her so in so many words. It had not been necessary. But she knew. Therefore he could not love her solely and supremely above all others, as she had once so desired. But she was content. She wanted him on his own terms, on any terms.

Now, with a great effort at self-control, she raised her eyes from the logs and met his. He slipped his hand from her wrist down over her fingers and held them in a long embrace. It was a beautiful moment to Cicely — but brief, a mere fragment, shattered by the sound of approaching steps. The butler crossing the hall. Reluctantly Cicely drew her hand away — her eyes away too — and sat alert.

'Miss Morgan is wanted on the telephone,' the butler announced from the threshold.

'Can't you take the message?'

'It is a long-distance call. Miss Morgan personally is wanted.'

Cicely rose.

'I'm sorry, Roger,' she said, smiling down at him. She placed her hand a moment on his shoulder. He covered it quickly with his own, pressing it against him hard.

'Come right back, won't you?'

'I will,' she promised, and left him, her heart singing.

CHAPTER IX

I

ROGER was standing up when she returned, his back to the burning logs, watching the doorway through which she must enter, his eyes still shining with that strange soft brilliance, his color still deep and glowing.

She crossed the room to him quickly.

'It was a call from Terry,' she said.

'From Terry?'

'There has been an accident.'

The brilliance of his eyes changed instantly to piercing sharpness. 'An accident to whom?'

'To Felix,' Cicely replied; then briefly, baldly, 'He was killed by a railroad train late yesterday afternoon,' she announced.

'Killed? Where? How?'

'Sit down and I'll tell you.'

'No thanks. I'll stand. Was Sheilah with him? Was Sheilah hurt?'

Cicely smiled and gave a tiny shrug. 'No. Sheilah wasn't hurt. Sheilah's all right, Roger. Sheilah herself spoke to me on the telephone.'

'Tell me what happened.'

'I will.'

'Well?'

How impatient he was!

'It was a very unnecessary death.'

'Yes? How?'

'They were playing on the railroad tracks — Felix and Phillip, and a school friend of Phillip's, placing pennies and bits of wire on the steel rail, it seems, for the train to run over and crush into queer shapes, and Felix, the boys report, had used his jackknife to twist a piece of wire, or cut it off, I don't know which, and evidently laid the knife down on the steel rail and forgot it, till it was too late.'

'You mean he tried to get it when it was too late?'

'Exactly. It was an old jackknife he had carried for years, and he was very fond of it, Sheilah says.'

'I understand. He was a queer chap. Always fond of all his tools.'

'He didn't notice the knife on the rails till the train was approaching. He pointed it out to the two boys, and called back to them as he ran that he was going to get it. And he almost did get it. They found the knife in his hand afterward. But he tripped and fell. The headlights on the approaching engine must have dazed him, Sheilah thinks. It was dark, late afternoon, mercifully so dark, the little boys saw none of the details. He was killed instantly, they say.' Cicely paused and leaning took a cigarette from the low table near by.

'A shocking death,' said Roger. 'Terrible for Sheilah. How is she taking it?'

'Perfectly calmly.'

'Shall you go to her?'

'Not immediately, I think.' Then, after another pause in which Cicely lit her cigarette, 'Shall you, Roger?' she inquired.

'Why, I don't know. I hadn't thought. It's all happened so suddenly — so unexpectedly. Do you think she'd want me to? Do you think I should? Not immediately, of course. But a little later. Do you think ——' he stopped, the full realization of what had happened, and its significance to Sheilah and to him, and perhaps to Cicely, too — breaking over him in a flood. Sheilah in trouble. Sheilah free. But was *he* free now? He looked sharply at Cicely. How much had he said before she left the room? How much had she suspected?

'Look at me, Cicely.'

She obeyed, calmly, impersonally, through a veil of smoke.

'Do you think I ought to go to Sheilah?'

'There is no reason why you ought not as far as I know,' she replied evenly.

'Do you want me to go?' he persisted, to make sure that he was released, if indeed she had ever imagined him to be bound.

'Of course I do,' lightly she lied, 'if it will make

you happy, and Sheilah happy, too. And,' she added with grim honesty in the same breath with her lie, 'I think it will.'

'Do you really?' eagerly, like a boy, Roger took her up. No, she hadn't suspected, nor expected, either. 'I want very much to make Sheilah happy,' he added.

'I know you do. I understand perfectly, Roger.'

'Oh, you're such a good friend of mine, Cicely,' he exclaimed.

Friend? Friend indeed!

Roger began pacing up and down the little room, plying Cicely with countless questions as to the details of Felix's death, to most of which she was forced to reply with forbearing patience. 'I don't know. I didn't ask. Sheilah didn't say.'

He left her half an hour later at her suggestion. He had planned to stay till the next afternoon, returning to Boston as was his custom, on Sunday evening.

'But this news has rather upset you, it seems to me,' Cicely had remarked as she watched him walking up and down the little book-lined cell, in which, as her guest, he was a prisoner till she set him free. 'Most men like to get out from underneath a roof when they're upset, — tramp, or something of the sort. Why don't *you*? Or, if you prefer, go back to Boston to-night, Roger, and come up another time.'

'You're sure you wouldn't mind?'

How he grasped at it!

'Of course not.'

'And you'll ask me another time?'

'Certainly,' she laughed. 'Go up and pack your things. I'll have a taxi called for you, and you can catch the nine-thirty express, if you hurry.'

Thus it is a thoroughbred accepts defeat.

2

At the same moment that Cicely closed the door of her room that night with fierce determination to shut out from her consciousness the thought of Roger now definitely denied her, Sheilah, behind another closed door, miles away, also fought the thought of him. All the long tense hours since Phillip had come running home with his shocking announcement, underneath her armour of composure, again and again the thought of Roger pricked Sheilah. When would he hear? What would he do when he did hear? Would he break their long silence? Or had her freedom come too late? Oh, uninvited, unwanted, and unworthy thoughts at such a time! Why did they persist? She wanted to think only of Felix, and to think of him with loyalty, with grief, with pity. Poor Felix — poor, kind, bungling, ineffectual Felix. Dead — gone. And so unnecessarily. So ignominiously. Swept into the unknown by a mistake — a

blunder. It had not crossed Sheilah's mind that there was any motive in his death. Her lifelong unawareness of his last gift to her was Felix's reward. Behind still another closed door, that night, lay Felix — silent, inarticulate, as he had been all his life, but crowned with success at last.

Sheilah had not called up Cicely to tell her of Felix's death until the end of the second day. Laetitia and Roddie, hastily summoned home from college and school, had already gone upstairs to their rooms. After Sheilah had said good-bye to Cicely in her composed voice (she had been like that all day — numb, calm, controlled without effort), she went into the kitchen. It was dark save for two checkered squares of moonlight on the floor. Softly she closed the door, and crossing the room, sat down at the kitchen table, burying her head in her arms, folded on the red cloth. Cicely had said, 'I will tell Roger. He is here with me now.' With her now? It was all right, of course. All right. As it should be. As she had chosen. But oh — oh — she was so tired — suddenly so very tired. If she could only cry!

Sheilah was still sitting at the kitchen table in the moonlight, when she heard dimly, through the closed door, the telephone, one short ring and two long ones. Her number — and a moment after, the clock on the mantel wheezingly struck the hour. Ten

o'clock. Who would be calling her so late? She rose wearily, and went out into the hall.

3

Roger did not catch the nine-thirty express from Wallbridge after all. It rumbled into the station and out again, while he was shut up in a telephone-booth, trying to establish communication with Terry, Vermont. The telephone-booth was cheap and battered, lined with pressed tin, and smelling of stale tobacco. He felt the same old distaste that he used to, in receiving Sheilah's voice in such unlovely surroundings, but he was in too much of a hurry to seek a more fitting place. He also felt the same old eagerness and excitement, as he impatiently waited for his call to be completed, increased to-night, by uncertainty. Would she wish him to call her? Her loyalty to Felix would be burning just now with abnormal intensity, he felt sure. Would she understand he respected that loyalty, and wanted only to share with her the burden of the shock of sudden death? Or had renouncement dulled her old understanding, and time cured her of her old need of him?

Anxiously he waited for her voice to find its way over the miles and miles of cable, stretched between him and her, and when finally it did, it was so rich and vibrant, it was as if she herself had come the long difficult way through the dark to him.

'Yes, this is she. This is Mrs. Nawn,' he heard her announce, calmly.

He closed his eyes tightly, pressing the receiver close to his ear.

'Sheilah.'

There was a short pause, and then, 'Oh, is it *you*?'

'Yes. It is I. I've just heard. I'm in a telephone-booth. The first one I could reach. I *had* to call you.'

'Oh, Roger ——' and suddenly the voice that had travelled so far stumbled, like a tired child at the end of a long race, falling into arms held out to it.

There was another pause, in which the arms seemed to gather the child closer. There were, in fact, many pauses.

'When may I come?' finally said Roger.

'Do you still want to?'

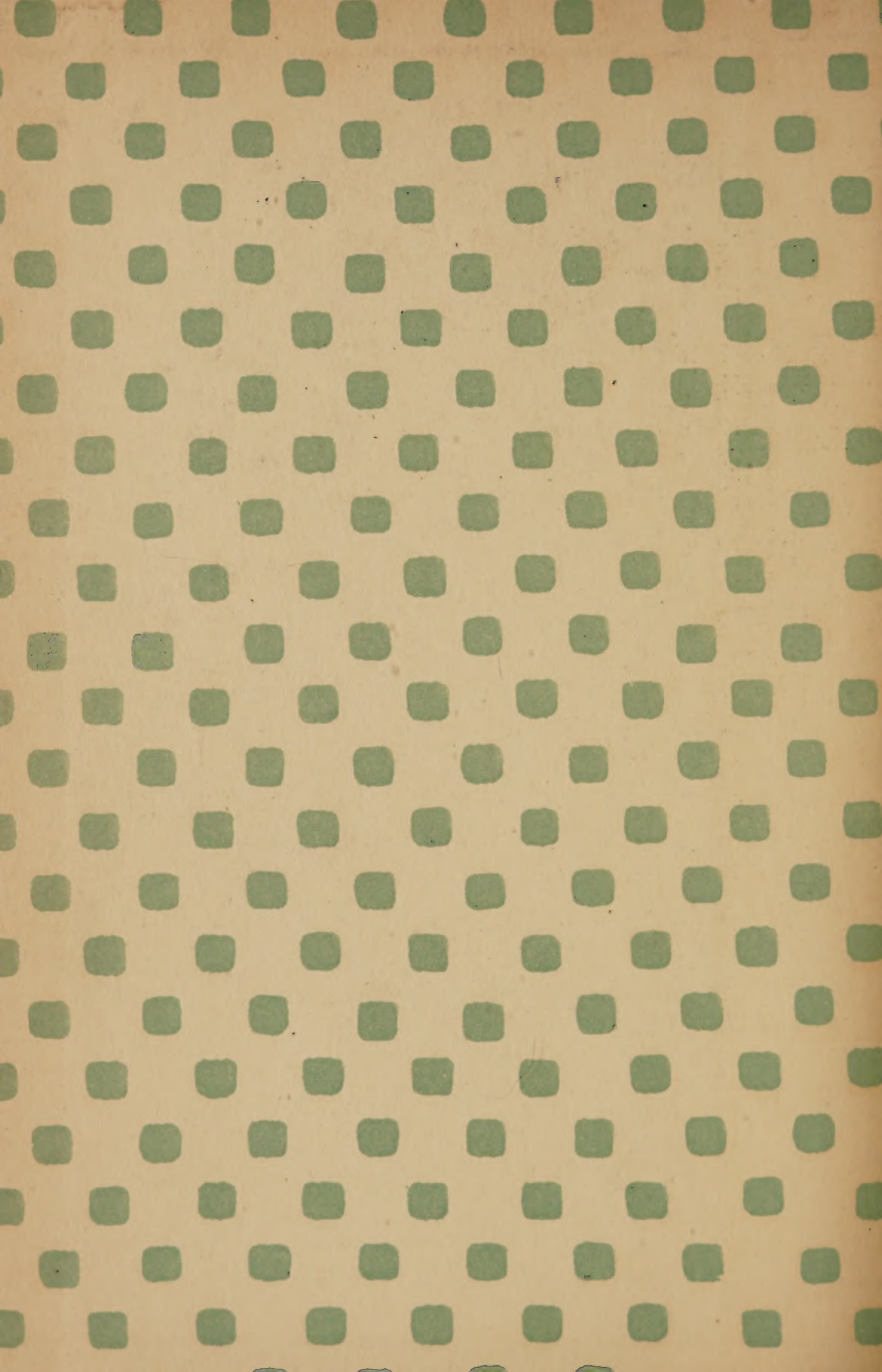
'There's nothing in the world I want to do so much!'

'Later, then. In the spring, please.'

'All right, later. In the spring,' he replied. 'I understand. And until then, until the spring, every day and every hour, I will ——' he didn't finish, but the quivering cable somehow conveyed his meaning to Sheilah.

'I know. I know,' she said.

THE END



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